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**School District Operational Relationships:  
A Qualitative Exploration of How System Linkages Support  
Organizational Learning**

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**School District Operational Relationships:  
A Qualitative Exploration of How System Linkages Support  
Organizational Learning**

**by**

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**Treatise**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my loving wife, Patricia, and my three beautiful daughters, Isabella, Gabriella, and Mia. You have given me your abundant support, encouragement, and strength to persevere through this process. All I do, I do for you.

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**School District Operational Relationships:  
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Organizational Learning**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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As federal and state policies continue to increase the demands for student academic achievement, school districts across the nation must function less as bureaucratic organizations and more as learning organizations. Operational relationships might be a significant avenue for school districts to promote such a transformative change. However, it is not clear how to accomplish such change. Thus, this study focused on an analysis of the pertinent literature to highlight what previous research suggests upon which to embark in the creation of successful relationships within school districts and the implications for further inquiry. While some previous research suggests that distributive leadership and systems thinking might ensure sustainability of school reform and lead to true learning organizations, few have focused on how leadership development is enhanced through operational relationships. This qualitative study investigated the types of operational relationships that exist within school districts, how those operational relationships are built, and the extent to which the operational

relationships reflect organizational learning attributes. A phenomenological approach, which used semi-structured interviews of eight participants from two mid-sized school districts was employed.

Findings for this study suggest that operational relationships may take the following forms: hierarchical relationship, mentor-protégé relationship, aligned relationship, and personal relationship. Several strategies appear to aide in the building of operational relationships. These include being accessible, engaging in meaningful experiences, and interacting with others. Findings also indicate that operational relationships may contribute to a district's progression from a bureaucratic organization towards organizational learning to some extent.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction to the Study**

In America, there is no shortage of comprehensive federal and state educational reform efforts, which have produced new guidelines, procedures, and programs.

Advocates of legislative reform wish to improve schools by increasing bureaucracy and accountability. Others argue that a one-size-fits-all approach to education that overemphasizes testing and does not provide enough funding to schools for successful implementation of reform mandates will not improve education. Instead, rigid hierarchical structures are deemphasized in order to promote organizational communication and learning. However, it is certain that many administrators at every level feel the pressure to perform.

On the other hand, there is a shift away from strictly bureaucratic separation of responsibilities to more interconnected models espoused by learning organizations, which emphasize collaboration among leaders in separate units and levels within the organization. Operational relationships among administrators within a school district may be a significant factor on which school districts should focus in order to promote such a change. Insight is needed regarding operational relationships between central office leadership, and principals if school districts aspire to change from operating as bureaucratic organizations to becoming true learning organizations with the ultimate goal of ensuring academic success for all students.

This phenomenological, qualitative study investigated the linkages that contribute to build relationships between central office administrators and elementary school principals and how those linkages are used to build and strengthen the district's

organizational learning capacity. This study also focused on how central office administrators within mid-sized school districts partner with principals and how principals build operational relationships. Further, the study attempted to elucidate whether the relationships help the district's evolution from a bureaucratic organization toward a learning organization.

This chapter presents the background of the study, specifies the problem addressed and the study's purpose. It concludes with the definitions of key terms and a brief overview of the study's methodology.

## **Background**

Over the past 50 years, educators have seen an influx of comprehensive federal and state mandates for educational reform efforts, which have produced new and complex legislation and policies that impact local districts and their schools. Legislative mandates, such as the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and Texas's House Bill 5 (2013), dictate that public schools improve student learning through testing, increased accountability, and competition. They also influence what students will be taught, tests that will be administered, the training of teachers, and how financial resources are spent on education. Although these federal and state initiatives are focused on school and district performance, they stifle a principal's ability to perform instructional leadership tasks by holding districts rather than individual schools ultimately responsible for student achievement. This causes districts to generate elaborate structures aimed at meeting compliance responsibilities and regulating the schools they oversee in a hierarchical fashion (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Honig, 2009).

When school districts focus primarily on conformity across the system, principals lose the ability to adapt their leadership behavior to the needs of the school (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005), which forces effective school leaders to find ways to navigate the bureaucratic system in order to remain effective. Mcpherson, Crowson, and Brieschke (1989) described school districts as institutions that “represent an unresponsive yet demanding jungle of lost opportunity, with an array of challenges and much worthwhile payoff if the hidden trails and the brush-covered traps can just be identified and negotiated” (p. 69). This adverse view of school districts as bureaucratic jungles places emphasis on an oppositional relationship between campus-level leaders and central office administrators. To create alignment and consistency across systems, and to ensure compliance of federal, state, and local initiatives, districts have increased centralized bureaucratic controls, but central office administrators can play a critical role in school reform by focusing on strengthening instructional leadership (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010).

Legislative reform policies are not new in the world of public education. As Geneva Gay points out, “many precedents of governmental mandates for educational reform and using financial incentives to leverage these expectations exist throughout the twentieth-century history of US education” (Gay, 2007, p. 280). The Cold War inspired the first illustration of comprehensive federal education legislation, when in 1958 Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) as the country’s answer to the Soviet launch of Sputnik. This reform measure by the government provided funding at all levels for math and science and also encouraged postsecondary education. The



Civil Rights movement of the 1960s ushered in extensive educational changes such as the creation of Head Start, the comprehensive early childhood education movement for low-income students, and in 1990 Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which required schools to provide a “free” and “appropriate” education to all eligible students with a disability. The 2009 Race to the Top initiative aimed to spur and reward innovation and reforms in states through awarding points for satisfying certain educational policies, such as performance-based evaluations for teachers and principals based on multiple measures of educator effectiveness, turning around the lowest-performing schools, and building and using data systems.

Although mandated educational reform is not a new phenomenon, NCLB was different from previous federal education laws due to the magnitude of imposition placed on school districts. Wanker and Christie (2005) assert that NCLB is “the most comprehensive and systemic education reform act passed by Congress in the last 40 years” (p. 57). The law’s impact extends to areas from school safety, student testing, reading and math instruction to professional improvement for teachers and strict assistance for low-performing schools. It is not surprising that there has been a bureaucratization of school districts in order to increase coherence and distribution of resources across the system.

Previous research has found that as school districts respond to increasing external requirements their efforts generate additional layers of bureaucracy (Meier, Polinard, & Wrinkle, 2000, p. 600). The more educational programs that are created and implemented in schools due to increased federal, state, or local requirements, more

policies, regulations, and administrative positions must be created to oversee additional programs. Bureaucracy causes more bureaucracy. Although these administrative systems work to build consistency among all schools within a district, they contradict the importance of designing site-specific interventions that Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) assert are part of doing the right work. The authors claim that “no predesigned comprehensive school reform program will address the unique characteristics of a given school” (p. 81) since every school is unique and requires on-sight flexible leadership.

Federal, state, and local education policies directly influence school practice (Dee, Jacob, & Schwartz, 2013). The responsibility of fulfilling legislative mandates has moved down to the individual campuses, placing a large burden on campus leadership for the ground-level implementation, as well as the success or failure in meeting legislative expectations. Comprehensive educational policies, such as NCLB for example, force campus leaders to make decisions within their schools, which impact personnel, finances, the curriculum and instructional program, schedules, and the time allotment for content areas. Principals must weigh options between providing a holistic, well-balanced learning experience for students and keeping the campus focused on meeting high-stakes testing goals in order to make Adequate Yearly Progress as mandated by the federal government as well as meeting the state’s accountability standards (Kajs & McCollum, 2010).

Whereas research has identified central office support through associations referred to as linkages in the areas of communication, resources, structures, relationships, and ideology as integral to helping principals learn to strengthen their instructional

leadership and foster student learning, the central office bureaucracy can shift into a command and control entity that applies external pressure for schools to conform to prescribed organizational arrangements (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Adamowski, Therriault, & Cavanna, 2007; Honig, 2012). In an effort to provide comprehensive system-wide improvement, districts increase support linkages between the central office and its campuses in order to provide campus leadership the help needed to implement federal, state, and local requirements successfully (Lasky, 2004). They also demand coordinated communication and distribution of resources across the system (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Thus, it is critical to examine how central office administrators build relationships with campus leaders and how such relationships move the district towards becoming a learning organization by fostering distributive leadership, systems thinking, and continual capacity building (Fullan, 2002; Fullan, 2005; Fullan, 2006; Jamali, Khoury, & Sahyoun, 2006; Senge, 1990).

Previous research has found that central office administrators do not always serve as support partners to campus principals (Adler & Borys, 1996). According to the Fordham Institute, researchers Adamowski, Therriault, and Cavanna (2007) found that autonomy gaps exist regarding how principals perceive their ability to raise student achievement within the terms and limits of their positions. Principals within district-operated schools differed significantly from those leading charter schools outside of the traditional central office bureaucracy. Three-fifths of the principals within district-operated systems felt somewhat constrained in their ability to raise achievement, compared to only one-third of their charter school counterparts. The authors contended

that district leaders should help principals build the informal networks and relationships that are so important to their success; however, the study did not outline how those networks and relationships should be built or how they can work to move a district from heavily bureaucratic to becoming a learning organization. Some large school districts have changed the role of central office executive-level administrators from primarily management, monitoring, or other hands-off principal support roles to operating as main agents of principal learning (Honig, 2012). This decision by these districts to partner central office administrators directly with principals is in response to the vast literature that highlights the important role campus leadership plays in increasing student achievement (Fullan, 2005; Honig, 2012; Marzano et al., 2005; Sergiovanni, 2001).

Further, there are few occupations that encompass such a wide range of responsibility as the job of the school principal. Principals set the directional vision for the school, manage buildings, hire and evaluate teachers, coordinate professional development opportunities, set and manage budgets, dole out consequences for students, work with parents, keep children safe, and work to reach the highest achievement ratings set forth by legislators and other policy makers (Sergiovanni, 2001; Marzano et al., 2005). The challenging job of the school principal is becoming so complex that one person cannot do it all (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001). This phenomenon suggests that “learning partnerships between executive-level central office staff and school principals merit further exploration” (Honig, 2012, p. 764).

## **Statement of the Problem**

Top-down reform efforts have caused the creation of multiple layers of bureaucracy from executive level positions reporting directly to the superintendent to non-professional auxiliary staff assigned to monitor regulatory responsibilities. Although central office job descriptions have been redesigned and departments have been formed in many districts in order to provide support, oversight, and resources for the implementation of federal, state, and local mandates, the principal remains the administrator who can best support student achievement through effective instructional leadership and central office support (Marzano, 2005). Honig's (2012) research has described how some central offices created executive level positions for the sole purpose of focusing on campus-level instructional leadership, as well as how central office bureaucracies can transform as they "engage in their own work and in their relationship with schools" (p. 388).

Previous research has examined how central office administrators can work with principals to foster instructional leadership development; however, the focus has been on large, urban school districts with the capability to appoint positions solely dedicated to such a task (Honig, 2012). On the other hand, many school districts cannot devote executive-level administrators to only coach and mentor principals to be instructional leaders since "school district central offices were originally established and have historically operated to carry out a limited range of largely regulatory and basic business functions—not to support teaching and learning improvement, let alone provide intensive supports for principals' instructional leadership" (Honig, 2012, p. 735). Central office

administrators in mid-sized school districts must wear many hats and serve not only as supporters of principals, but also as supervisors with the responsibility to oversee compliance with federal, state, and local requirements. As a result, inquiring about how central office administrators in mid-sized districts build operational relationships with elementary school principals to foster organizational learning in addition to responding to ongoing regulatory, bureaucratic responsibilities is needed.

Principals may have the preparation and certification to fulfill managerial duties, but they are in need of additional help, which operational relationships built upon the principles of organizational learning such as collective capacity building, systems thinking, and distributive leadership may provide. Central office administration may provide such a relationship (Honig, 2012). In addition, as the job of the principal is becoming complex, they need to continually enhance their instructional leadership capacity in order to meet increasing accountability demands. One way to do this is to partner with central office administration in order to increase their capacity as systems thinkers, which as Fullan (2006) stated “requires conceptual thinking that is grounded in creating new contexts” (p. 114); however, limited research focuses on how central office support systems actually meet principals’ leadership needs (Honig, 2012; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). For instance, Lasky (2004) found that systemic linkages exist and can be strengthened between central offices and schools “that can be potent forces in educational improvement” (p. 21), but the focus was not on how the linkages are applied to build relationships nor to bring about changes towards becoming a learning organization. The five linkages that serve as critical pathways that connect the central

bureaucracy of an organization to its subunits are resource linkages, structural linkages, communication linkages, relational linkages, and ideological linkages, however; these were not employed to investigate the connection between central office administrators and elementary campus principals (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010, p. 743). Thus, it is not clear how central office administrators and campus leaders employ these system linkages and how they are used to build relationships within a school district in order to promote ongoing campus leadership capacity development and distributive leadership.

### **Purpose of Study**

Principals are leaders charged with the immense task of ensuring constant teacher development and student success. They function within complex systems and must continually enhance their leadership capacity in order to reach accountability measures set by federal, state, and local policy. They cannot do this alone. District central offices are poised to be the entity that can best support campus principals in their leadership responsibilities or can serve as a controlling agency focused on uniformity, coherence, and standardization. This study aimed to determine what operational relationships exist, how the district central office administrators and elementary school principals build the operational relationships, and in what way the relationships reflect organizational learning.

### **Research Question**

The research questions that guided this study focused on the linkages between central office administrators including the superintendent, an executive-level district administrator, and elementary school principals and what linkages are used to support

moving from a bureaucratic control-oriented organization to one exhibiting organizational learning characteristics:

- 1) What operational relationships exist between central office administrators and elementary school principals?
- 2) How are the existing operational relationships built?
- 3) To what extent do the relationships reflect the attributes of organizational learning?

### **Overview of Methodology**

For this study on central office and campus leadership relationships, an interpretivist phenomenological theoretical paradigm was used since the study's goal was to determine central office and campus leadership linking actions from the perspective of the campus principals and central office leaders themselves. Perceptions and opinions are inherently contextual as well as individualistic in nature; therefore, an interpretivist methodology was suitable since one of the basic assumptions of the interpretivist framework is the idea that reality depends on context and interpretation. According to Denzin and Lincoln, "Realities are apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). In contrast to the positivist framework (Crotty, 1998), which seeks to discover objective truth through the rules of formal logic and experimental design, interpretivism seeks to contribute to the understanding of social reality by designing a study to better understand complex, qualitative phenomenon. This supposition reflects certain beliefs: first, knowledge is socially constructed and therefore



meaning will develop from the research process through the use of interviews with participants; second, the results will be context specific and will serve to inform rather than be based in objective reality (Graham, 1981).

A qualitative approach was necessary for this study since qualitative data, as Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña pointed out, “are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of human process” and also give the researcher a means to lead to “serendipitous findings and to new integrations” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 4). Since investigating central office and campus leadership relationships is inherently an exploration of complex human behavior within dynamic contexts, qualitative research methods provided a way to analyze behavior that is greatly affected by the bureaucratic context in which central office administrators and principals work. The researcher ensured that this study exemplified the essences of qualitative studies, which, according to Glesne (1999), are appropriate for adding value and a profound understanding of perceptions and thought development. As Hays and Singh stated, “to this end, individuals interact with one another in context, and patterns emerge that illustrate phenomena” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 6). This study attempted to tell the story of central office administrator’s and elementary school principals’ perceptions of their relationships and how these relationships encompass the values of a learning organization as conveyed by the particular interviewees.

### **Definition of Terms**

Accountability. An expected level of student achievement as measured by federally mandated assessments set by federal, state, and local policy.

Bureaucracy. A bureaucracy is organized into a hierarchy of authority with well-defined chains of command. Each layer has specific responsibilities and a line of authority and subordination. Decision-making and power flow downward. Bureaucracies also have specialization and division of labor. Bureaucrats specialize in one area and are hired solely based on professional competency. Each specialist does what he or she knows best and then passes the work along to another specialist. Tasks fall within a single, relatively narrow function. Management by rules and regulations is another element of a bureaucracy. Operating procedures are standardized in order to facilitate consistency of practice at all levels and arenas within the organization. Workers always follow the same procedures to increase efficiency and predictability in order for the organization to produce similar results in similar circumstances (Jorgensen, 2011).

Central Office. The district-level system made up of non-campus personnel that includes the superintendent, executive leadership positions, other non-campus administrative positions such as directors and coordinators, as well as non-administrative support personnel, who perform all the school district functions outside of individual schools. The term central office refers to the bureaucratic local system that coordinates, supports, and regulates the individual schools within the district.

Central Office Administrator. For purposes of this study, central office refers to the district-level administrators who are not assigned to campus leadership positions. This includes administrators in the areas of curriculum and instruction, special education, business, operations, human resources, and technology. This term also includes the superintendent.

Distributive leadership. Leadership practices which “rely on multiple sources of leadership across the organization to guide and complete numerous tasks that vary in size, complexity, and scope” (Hoy & Miskel, 2008, p. 439).

Elementary School Principal. An elementary school principal is the campus-level, lead administrator working in a school with pre-kindergarten or kindergarten through grade four, five, or six.

Executive-level Central Office Administrator. For the purpose of this study, an executive-level central office administrator was the district superintendent and a district-level administrator bearing the title of associate, deputy, or assistant superintendent who supervises campus principals and who reports directly to the superintendent.

Instructional Leader. A principal as an instructional leader is not only a school administrator or manager. Principals who operate as school managers deal strictly with administrative duties compared to principals who are instructional leaders. The role of an instructional leader comprises functions directly related to the advancement of student learning. They concentrate on defining the school’s mission, setting specific learning goals, allocating resources to instruction, ensuring the curriculum is guaranteed and viable, monitoring lesson plans, evaluating teachers, building developing teacher into leaders, and promoting a positive school learning climate (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Marzano et al., 2005;). Instructional leaders make teaching and learning the highest priority of the school.

Linkages. A linkage is, in essence, a bridge between two otherwise disconnected points within in the educational system which provides a framework to systematically

analyze the connections that exist across the system and how resources and communication move across those connections (Lasky, 2004). Lasky's research focused on five linkages: structural, formal and informal communication, relational, ideological, and temporal. For the purpose of this study, the researcher will focus on the structural, communication, relational, and ideological linkages.

Mid-Sized School District. For the purpose of this study, a mid-sized school district is a Texas public school district with a student population between eight thousand and fifteen thousand students between grades pre-K through twelve.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The No Child Left Behind Act is a bipartisan bill passed by Congress and signed into law in 2001. It supports standards-based education reform based on the principle that setting high standards and instituting quantifiable goals will improve school and district performance. The Act mandates that states develop and administer assessments in basic skills to all students at select grade levels in order for districts to receive federal school funding.

Operational Relationship. For the purpose of this study, an operational relationship is a relationship between executive-level administrators and elementary school principals working within the same school district that takes a collaborative approach to achieving success. The relationships include the superintendent's relationship with a deputy or assistant superintendent and an elementary school principal. They also include the relationship between the deputy or assistant superintendent and an elementary school principal. The operational relationships are characterized by a common purpose and mutual benefit. The operational relationship is a way of doing

business that may embody the principles of organizational learning and seeks to change traditional bureaucratic relationships to a shared culture where individual and collective capacity is built and leadership is distributed throughout the organization. The relationship approach is based on trust, commitment to shared goals, and an understanding of each other's expectations and values.

Organizational Learning. Organizational learning enables organizations to adapt and change as a result of experience. Organizational learning encompasses three characteristics: systems thinking, distributed leadership, and continual capacity development. Leadership is distributed throughout all levels within the organization and agents work towards a common vision taking initiative for common goals. Agents within the organization recognize how each is interconnected in the system. Organizational learning fosters adaptability, innovation, and collaboration among the members of an organization (Fullan, 2006; Senge, 1990).

State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR). The criterion-referenced state assessment given to students in grades three through eight in Texas to measures a student's knowledge and skills learned in the particular grade level. Students' scores are used to determine if schools meet state accountability standards.

Systems Thinking. Systems thinking is an approach that focuses on the way that a system's constituent parts interrelate and how these parts mutually interact to benefit the entire organization. It emphasizes developing innovative solutions to complex situations and encourages collaboration among the different units within the system in order to foster continual learning and renewal. Systems thinking requires a change from linear,

cause-effect thinking to thinking about the underlying complexities of cause and effect relationships and acknowledges that the individuals within the organization are part of a web of interdependence.

TEA. The Texas Education Agency is the branch within the Texas government responsible for public elementary and secondary education.

Transformational leadership. A leadership model which seeks to be proactive, raise awareness of individual and collective interests, and achieve high achievement outcomes by idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Hoy & Miskel, 2008).

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The research only focused on the perceptions of elementary campus principals and executive-level central office administrators, but did not include perceptions from other administrators such as directors, assistant principals, or coordinators, nor did it address the perceptions of teachers, students, parents, school board members, or community members. Only principals and executive-level central office administrators from mid-sized school districts were individually interviewed and the interviews were limited to one session per participant. No follow-up interview sessions were conducted.

Due to the use of a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study has limited generalizability. As Wiersma (2000) pointed out, since “qualitative research occurs in the natural setting it is extremely difficult to replicate studies” (p. 211). Another limitation is the study’s reliance on the researcher’s subjective judgments, essentially effecting objectivity in the study (Hatch, 2002). Also, since the research design uses

interviews to gauge the perceptions of two superintendents, a deputy and an assistant superintendent, and four elementary school principals working in mid-sized school districts, results may not necessarily be generalized to other school districts or other public education institutions as a whole.

### **Assumptions**

For the purpose of this study the following assumptions apply:

First. Principals were selected primarily based on student performance on the state assessment known as the STAAR for the most recent three years. Thus it is assumed that STAAR is a reasonable measure of student achievement.

Second. Schools selected for this study based on high student achievement according to the STAAR, were successful in large part because of the principal's effective leadership.

Third. Principals and central office administrators interviewed for this study answered truthfully and accurately.

Fourth. The elementary school principals and the executive-level central office administrators believe the principal's role as the instructional leader to be important but not the sole critical factor that determines the academic achievement of their schools. It was assumed that the participants believe the executive-level central office administrators and elementary school principal relationship is beneficial to the success of the school.

Fifth. High performing school districts which have met standard in all four indexes in the Texas' accountability system may reflect some of the attributes of

organizational learning. These organizational learning attributes are systems thinking, distributive leadership, and continual capacity development.

### **Significance of the Study**

Administrators play a key role in any school improvement effort. The emphasis on accountability, brought on by the passing of NCLB and other state and local policies, holds that school leaders not only implement effective programs but also provide evidence of their success and justification for changes. Conducting this study using semi-structured interviews with executive-level central office administrators and elementary school principals working in mid-sized school districts added deep understanding in the area of central office and campus leadership operational relationships as well as how the connections, or linkages between the different levels of administrators within the organization foster either organizational bureaucracy or organizational learning.

This study's findings may inform superintendents responsible for prioritizing central office administrators' objectives and responsibilities by establishing the expectation for central office administrators to establish operational relationships with campus leaders. Findings from this study may also assist superintendents to move the school district from a reliance on formal hierarchical structures, division of labor, and a dependence on rules and regulations towards an organizational learning model which promotes distributive leadership among its members as well as continual individual and collective capacity building and systems thinking. Additionally, this study may provide specific steps superintendents can take to promote central office administrator and



campus principal relationships that foster collaboration, problem solving, and continual learning.

The study may also benefit central office staff members and principals who currently operate as distinct units only connected through the traditional hierarchy focused on supervision and accountability. Central office administrators and principals may use the findings to develop ways to increase individual and collective learning between the two entities to form partnerships that adopt a collaborative, systems thinking approach to problem solving within the school system that may help districts move towards organizational learning. Findings from this study may also support aspiring superintendents as well as aspiring principals and central office administrators. These leaders may benefit from this research regarding learning how to building successful operational relationships and understand specific potential of the emerging linkages.

Research regarding school improvement over the past twenty years has not fully investigated the potential of districts as substantial support for school reform (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). Sustainable school improvement will require schools and districts to work together. The critical relationship between key central office administrators and elementary school principals is only beginning to be explored in the literature. This study may shed additional light on how operational relationships foster a district's movement towards organizational learning. More importantly, the results of this study may extend the body of literature relative to district-level management in the area of school leadership support and how structural, communication, relational, and

ideological linkages can be used to promote an organizations transformation from a bureaucratic organization to organizational learning.

## **Summary**

This chapter explained how federal, state, and local policy requirements have created an environment in which districts increasingly can become regulatory agencies focused primarily on establishing systemic controls across school districts. Although research shows there is a need for some degree of centralized control, it also contends that districts must focus on “harmonious relationship between administrative and bureaucratic controls, capacity-building strategies, appropriate resource allocation, and the building of professional community and professional accountability across the district” (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010, p. 742). Chapter one also identified that previous work has been done with large, urban districts and high school principals, but that there is a gap in the literature regarding how superintendents and central office administrators in mid-sized districts build operational relationships with the elementary school principals they supervise. The purpose of the study was introduced and accompanied by the corresponding research questions. A brief overview of the proposed methodology, as well as the delimitations, limitations, and assumptions were also addressed.

Chapter two will provide an overview of school districts as bureaucratic institutions to provide context for the study. It will also review the literature associated organizational learning, systems thinking, distributive leadership, and Lasky’s (2004) concept of system linkages that will be used as an organizing framework. Research

methodology including the design, site and participant selection, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, of the study will be further explained in Chapter three.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

With federal and state accountability on the rise, strong school leadership is needed for schools to meet the desired reform outcomes from legislation such as NCLB and Texas's House Bill 5 (Adamowski et al., n.d.; Dee et al., 2013; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Ultimately, the responsibility to meet these accountability standards falls to campus principals. However, should principals be expected to do this alone?

Principals are part of larger organizations that operate as bureaucratic, regulatory institutions that are not set up to provide the kind of leadership support they need. For example, research has found that principals must continually build their instructional leadership skills to meet the increased demands they face (Fullan, 2002; Marzano et al., 2005), but school districts do not always possess the characteristics necessary to provide them with assistance in continually building their professional capacity (Dery, 1998; Fullan, 1995). In fact, school systems that operate as bureaucratic institutions can serve to hinder a principal's ability to meet the specific needs of the campus since these institutions put emphasis on system-wide coherence and compliance rather than on offering its leaders the professional autonomy necessary for continual learning and growth (Adamowski et al., n.d.; Adler & Borys, 1996; Corcoran et al., 2001).

School districts must operate less as bureaucratic organizations and more as learning organizations that provide an environment in which individuals and units within the organization function interdependently in order to foster continual individual and collective capacity building and problem solving. The successful linking of the different

units within an organization is vital if organizational learning is going to be imbedded in the culture of the entire system. As Jamali, Khoury, & Sahyoun (2006) explained:

While the behavior of the learning organization (the overall system) cannot be obtained by summing the behaviors of its constituent parts, the characteristics of post-bureaucratic organizations can be considered as integrative competencies, providing connective tissue and creating the knowledge, skills, abilities, and propensities that support and enhance the respective disciplines. They have a multiplier effect through their multiple value adding interactions and synergetic inter-relationships, enabling in turn improved overall understanding, performance and decisions. Learning organizations in other words capitalize on many different constituents with non-linear relationships. The synergetic effects of these sub-components allow the organization to fulfill in turn higher-level goals (p. 346).

Although it is unlikely for school systems to lose all bureaucratic characteristics, the literature suggests that steps towards organizational learning must take place (Adler & Borys, 1996; Jamali et al., 2006). The rejection of the bureaucracy's strict division of expertise and responsibilities offers organization learning systems an opportunity to establish connections between otherwise disconnected parts within the organization. One of the foundational mechanisms of organizational learning vital for continual individual and collective capacity development is the interconnectedness, i.e. operational relationships, of its leaders (Fullan, 2006).

This study set out to investigate what operational relationships exist between central office administrators and elementary school principals, how the operational

relationships are built, and in what way the relationships reflect organizational learning. This chapter reviews the literature related to the following topics: bureaucratic organizations, learning organizations, leaders as systems thinkers, distributive leadership, and Lasky's model of system linkages. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the reviewed literature, identification of the gap in the research, and a summary of the chapter.

### **Bureaucratic Organizations**

Max Weber, the German sociologist, wrote extensively about the heavy influence institutions such as religion and capitalism have on a society. Perhaps second only to the institutions of religion and economics, educational bureaucracy has dehumanized policy making into rationalized decisions based on what is best for the 'machine' rather than individuals (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2001). He formulated the Theory of Social and Economic Organization in 1947 that focused primarily on organizational structure. He believed that organizations should be divided into hierarchies with established, strong lines of authority and control and advocated that organizations should develop comprehensive and detailed standard operating procedures to perform preplanned tasks. In a bureaucracy, the worker respects the right of the managers to direct activities dictated by the organizational rules and regulations.

Institutions in the public and private sector, such as school districts, rely on bureaucracies to function since they are highly organized and based on administrative rules and conformity to procedures. According to the Weberian model (Jorgensen, 2011), bureaucracies encompass the following features:

- **Formal Hierarchy:** A bureaucracy is organized into a hierarchy or authority with well-defined chains of command. Each layer has specific responsibilities and a line of authority and subordination. Decision making and power flow downward.
- **Specialization and division of labor:** Bureaucrats specialize in one area and are hired solely based on professional competency. Each specialist does what he or she knows best and then passes the work along to another specialist. Tasks fall within a single, relatively narrow function.
- **Management by rules and regulations:** Operating procedures are standardized in order to facilitate consistency of practice at all levels of the organization.

Workers always follow the same procedures to increase efficiency and predictability in order for the organization to produce similar results in similar circumstances.

Simon's "programmable decisions" is a useful metaphor for the illustration of bureaucratic management by rules and regulations (Simon, 1960). Programmed decisions typically do not require much thought or discussion, and can generally be automated to ensure consistency across an organization. Adherence to the status quo is "aided by such control mechanisms as impersonality, standardization, uniformity, hierarchy, and preprogramming," allowing routine to smoothly reign (Dery, 1998, p. 677). Whereas capacity building and dealing with uncertainty are essential to organizational learning, it is exactly this kind of action that bureaucratic organizations attempt to suppress so as to ensure predictability and institute routine (Adler & Borys, 1996; Jamali, Khoury, & Sahyoun, 2006).

Weber felt that western civilization was changing from value-oriented thinking to technocratic thinking at the expense of individualistic autonomy (Scaff, 1987). He referred to this occurrence as society's "iron cage" of rationality and asserted that modern man is disenchanted due to bureaucratic rationalization and the acceleration of capitalism (Kalberg, 2001). Whereas centuries past consisted of 'value-rational' action (action that was valuable to the actor in and for itself), modernity consists of 'instrumental rational action' (where people act towards the ends of employers and institutions). This loss of autonomy and agency, according to Weber, leaves people wholly unfulfilled and trapped in an 'Iron Cage'. He also counteracted his negative assertions with the notion that bureaucracies provide the efficiency, elimination of favoritism, and organization necessary to organize human activity within institutions ("Bureaucracy," n.d.).

The institutional actors' fighting over policy interpretation and implementation are contained within institutions which have recognized and relatively stable collections of rules, practices, and procedures that help to shape and structure the actors' behavior. In fact, institutions are defined by their compilation of traditions, formal and informal rules, norms, and expectations for appropriate behavior. No one in the institution operates outside of this influence. Weber acknowledged that a "deadly struggle" persists between the humanity's individualistic nature and the iron cage that automatizes behavior in a coordinated fashion to benefit the bureaucracy (Scaff, 1987, p. 743).

Although institutions apply considerable pressure on actors to comply with the institutional norms, beliefs, and routines, the logic of appropriateness can also bring about an institutional actor's behavior that is either in line with or sometimes counter to



the institution's explicated processes. Action, such as following policy and procedures, is seen within bureaucracies as driven by rules of appropriate or ideal behavior, organized into institutions. Bureaucracies thrive because rules are followed primarily because they are seen as natural, right, expected, and legitimate. Actors seek to fulfill the obligations "encapsulated in a role, an identity, a membership in a political community or group, and the ethos, practices and expectations of its institutions" which make actors perform routine duties without questioning authority or the legitimacy of the policies (March & Olsen, 2009, p. 3). Creativity and collaboration, critical to learning organizations, are underdeveloped within bureaucratic organizations.

As members entrenched in a bureaucracy, administrators do what they see as appropriate for themselves in a particular type of situation. However, sometimes people are motivated to act outside of what the bureaucracy has outlined through its formal policies and practices. A principal who considers him or herself an instructional leader may ask the question, "What would a person who puts student learning above all else do in this situation?" For example, a principal may contemplate supplanting a district-mandated reading program with alternative resources he or she considers more appropriate for his or her students, an act which would be prohibited in a strict bureaucratic organization but encouraged in a learning organization.

Principals, like most policy decision makers, do not operate in a vacuum, nor are their decisions made in isolation, safely sealed off from outside influences. Although research has found that effective principals are willing to challenge the status quo, a very powerful influence that impacts the change-agent's current course of action are the

decisions made by prior policy makers (Marzano et al., 2005; Pierson, 2000). This phenomenon can be seen in all areas of society, including schools. Altering an institution's characteristics that have been solidifying for many years is particularly difficult because of a concept known as path dependence.

Path dependence, a conception within the historical institutionalism theoretical framework, clarifies why policy decisions are so often constrained by the decisions that have already been made. Previous research has explained that earlier steps in a particular direction generate further movement in the same direction (Pierson, 2000). The cost of radically altering the course already set is very high and usually proves to be a difficult task. Some principals may see altering ineffective policy implementation, practices, and regulations as obstacles that are too difficult to alter or fully remove and therefore look for ways to navigate around them instead, perpetuating the bureaucratic system's tendency to appoint a manager into a campus administrative position rather than a leader with the capacity to be "attuned to the big picture, a sophisticated conceptual thinker who transforms the organization through people and teams" (Fullan, 2002, p. 17).

Rational choice theorists have argued that institutional actors behave in calculated and individualistic ways, carefully balancing costs against benefits, while "taking both individual values and structural elements as equally important determinants of outcome" (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997, p. 193). In order to understand an institutional actor's behavior with regard to decision making, one must ascertain the actor's values and goals. Choices are intentional in that people weigh the different options available in a particular situation. Given that individuals have reasons for what they do, "their behavior is

predictable only if their motivations are known” (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997, p. 194). Within highly regulated and systematized institutions, the predictability of a manager’s behavior is crucial in order to maintain order and consistency across an organization (Adler & Borys, 1996; Meier, Polinard, & Wrinkle, 2000). However, this predictability of behavior inhibits organizational learning by excluding individual autonomy.

Bureaucratic organizations also differ from learning organizations in that they maintain a rigid separation of duties and responsibilities between their units. In a bureaucratic school system, each department operates individually from the others and retains its own set of operating procedures, tasks, and area of expertise (Adler & Borys, 1996). They function as educational silos rather than as units linked by a web of interdependence (Senge, 2011).

### **Organizational Learning**

Organizational management in the twenty-first century has taken a new direction that promotes a fundamentally different approach to managing employees than the traditional strict, command and control viewpoints espoused by the bureaucratic model. Within the organizational learning paradigm, people are treated as the “natural resource and capital asset of the organization and the most important source of sustainable competitive advantage” (Jamali, Khoury, & Sahyoun, 2006, p. 338). A shift from the bureaucratic institution’s consideration of labor as a component of production is taking place resulting in a different organizational approach. Peter Senge (1990) defined a learning organization in his seminal book *The Fifth Discipline* as one “where people continually increase their capacity to produce the results they truly desire, where new and

expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, and where collective aspiration is set free” (Senge, 1990, p. 3). Senge claimed that this new pattern of thinking called ‘systems thinking’ is foundational for effectively seeing systems as wholes and argued that it is “a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static ‘snapshots’” (Senge, 1990, p. 68). Systems thinking, according to Senge, requires a change from linear, cause-effect thinking to thinking about the underlying complexities of cause and effect relationships. It also necessitates an understanding that the bureaucratic forces of systems can be enslaving as long as those forces remain unchallenged (Senge, 1990).

Continual organizational rejuvenation by merging a set of core processes that foster a positive inclination to learn, adjust, and change is at the heart of a learning organization. The most prominent practices that are frequently cited in the literature include empowerment, team building, communication, building trust, commitment, and flexibility. The learning organization requires the careful nurturing and skilled management of human resources with a focus on psychological commitment, empowerment, teamwork, trust, and participation in order for the people within the organization to continually build their capacity to obtain the results they desire (Jamali et al., 2006; Senge, 1990) through collaboration (Senge, Lichtenstein, Kaeufer, Bradbury, & Carroll, 2007, p. 47).

Learning organizations build collaborative communities through thinking together, sharing, and collective problem solving. Researchers (Senge et al., 2007) investigating cross-sector collaboration with business organizations operating within

global markets found that when members of the Sustainability Consortium committed to skills of reflective conversation and working with mental models as a way to build more productive relationships effective collaboration was the result. The group's goals included the application of systems thinking, working with mental models and fostering personal and shared vision to face complex sustainability issues. The six year ethno-methodological study revealed that collaboration and relational work, achieved through genuine dialogue can set the tone for systemic initiatives and practice. According to the researchers, genuine dialogue can be reached through deep and powerful questioning that cannot be orchestrated or planned, but instead emerge over time through shifts in strategic context. The key is to be aware of and employ them seriously in a “spirit of dialogue and joint exploration” and to recognize their involvement in building collaboration. Senge et al. (2007) describe the importance of the relational linkage to collaboration:

Success in any collaboration between organizations rests on the quality of relationships that shape cooperation, trust, mutuality and joint learning. But supporting relationship building is not easy, given the competitive culture and transactional relationships typical in organizational life. Only rarely do groups move beyond “politeness” or win-lose debates into more authentic and reflective interactions characterized by candor, openness and vulnerability (p. 47).

The importance of the relational linkage cannot be overstated. According to Senge et al. (2007), effective relational work boosts deep, complex conversations, asks challenging questions, and confronts dysfunctional individual and collective practices and

attitudes within the organization. Action oriented change initiatives requiring fresh perspectives are also supported by the relational linkage. There is also much support in the business literature regarding collaboration and its fostering of innovation within the learning organization. As researchers Peters, Johnston, Pressey, & Kendrick pointed out (2010), “a network with superior knowledge transfer mechanisms will be able to compete more effectively against other production networks with less effective knowledge sharing routines in terms of innovation” (p. 478). These “knowledge sharing routines” establish collaborative contexts, which reinforce the acquisition of diverse information from network partnerships and the development of shared understanding, all which foster creative thinking and learning within the organization.

Innovation is another key ingredient of achievement and effectiveness within a learning organization, which entails fostering the inventive potential of the organization by adopting new ideas and harnessing creativity and enthusiasm of its employees. Learning organizations continually build peoples’ individual and collective capacity through autonomy, entrepreneurship, flexibility, and risk taking (Jamali et al., 2006; Marzano et al., 2005; Senge, 1990). People within the organization are seen as problem solvers and are given opportunities to generate ideas and solutions. DuFour and Marzano asserted that “improvement strategies based on building collective capacity regard educators as the solution to, rather than the cause of, the complex problems confronting public education” (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 19). Cultivating learning in organizations has simultaneously emerged as a serious challenge for administrators given the pivotal role it plays in allowing the human capacity for creativity and innovation to

prosper. Given that organizations face numerous pressures and compelling changes, many have experienced the need to “abandon their traditional bureaucratic orientation and embrace a range of new characteristics revolving around empowerment, teamwork, trust, communication, commitment, and flexibility” (Jamali, Khoury, & Sahyoun, 2006, p. 339).

Michael Fullan (2006) also acknowledges the importance of continual improvement and the building of individualistic and collective capacity. He refers to this concept as “deep learning” and asserts that “sustainability requires continuous improvement, adaptation and collective problem-solving in the face of complex challenges that keep arising.” (p. 119). Fullan rejects the bureaucratic notion of division of labor and isolated skills deployment in favor of “collaborative cultures of inquiry, which alter the culture of learning in the organization away from dysfunctional and non-relationships toward the daily development of culture that can solve difficult or adaptive problems” (Fullan, 2006, p. 118).

A review of the literature suggests that as education institutions adopt school reform and improvement efforts, capacity building and systems thinking must become a core feature of all improvement strategies, and must focus explicitly on the difficult issues of sustainability (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan, 1995; Fullan, 2005; Fullan, 2006; Honig, 2012; Lasky, 2004; Marzano et al., 2005). Fullan (2004) has also argued that leadership is needed that represents system thinkers in action stating:

These are leaders who work intensely in their own schools or districts or other levels, and at the same time connect with and participate in the bigger picture. To

change organizations and systems will require leaders who get experience in linking to other parts of the system. These leaders in turn must help develop other leaders with similar characteristics (p. 114).

School systems operating as learning organizations offer the potential to continually build both individual leadership capacity as well as the collective capacity of teams of leaders within the system by creating a continual loop of leadership development; however, “the complexity of the learning organization implies that a one-step overnight metamorphosis is highly unlikely” (Jamali et al., 2006, p. 347). Therefore, collaborative operational relationships between high-level central office administrators and school principals are a critical element of schools moving from bureaucratic institutions to learning organizations. These relationships would require that administrators embrace a view as systems thinkers rather than placing a strict emphasis on bureaucratic separation of roles and responsibility.

### **Leaders as Systems Thinkers**

Research has highlighted a need for a fundamental redesign necessary for school systems to transform into continual capacity building entities with a culture that emphasizes connectedness among its leaders (Fullan, 1995; Jamali et al., 2006). Fullan (1995) has asserted that restructuring is not enough since these types of reforms that decentralize decision making to schools through site-based management may have changed governance procedures but do not ultimately improve student learning nor do they improve the schools’ capacity for continual improvement. The nature of this transformation from bureaucratic organizations to learning organizations is the



development of collaborative work cultures that concentrate on the continuous learning and professional development. Fullan (1995) found that in the relatively successful restructuring schools studied, “focused time was devoted to the development of knowledge and skills and the acquisition and examination of information” (p. 232). Continuous capacity development was a feature of these schools both in terms of increases in knowledge and skills as well as the expansion of collaborative information sharing and processing.

For school districts to transform from strictly bureaucratic organizations into learning institutions, the development of a new kind of leadership is necessary. Fullan (1995) refers to this leadership as “system thinkers in action.” Reminiscent of Senge’s (1990) “systems thinking,” system thinkers in action are individuals who function within networks of interdependence and possess a profound and determined commitment to real learning through continual individual and collective capacity building. Fullan (2006) points out that systems thinkers in action are leaders who “work intensely in their own schools or districts or other levels, and at the same time connect with and participate in the bigger picture” (p. 114). Thus, operational relationships must be formed with different people within the organization with distinct ideas and who see the system from different vantage points to come together and collaboratively start to see something that they could not see individually (Fullan, 1995; Fullan, 2005; Fullan, 2006; Senge, 1990).

Senge (1990) provides insight into the systems thinking concept and its potential for transforming school systems into learning organizations that continually build

capacity by describing how smart individuals are no longer needed but rather collective intelligence. He explained:

We all have probably spent too much time thinking about ‘smart individuals.’

That’s one of the problems with schools. They are very individualistic, very much about ‘the smart kids and the dumb kids.’ That’s not the kind of smartness we need. The smartness we need is collective. We need cities that work differently. We need industrial sectors that work differently. We need value chains and supply chains that are managed from the beginning until the end to purely produce social, ecological and economic well-being. That is the concept of intelligence we need, and it will never be achieved by a handful of smart individuals. It’s not about ‘the smartest guys in the room.’ It’s about what we can do collectively. So the intelligence that matters is collective intelligence, and that’s the concept of ‘smart’ that I think will really tell the tale (Senge, 2011).

In other words, to shift from bureaucratic organizations to learning organizations, school systems will require leaders with the ability to connect to other parts of the system and who can in turn develop that same skill in other leaders. According to Fullan (2006), “the main mark of a school principal, for example, is not the impact he or she has on the bottom line of student achievement at the end of their tenure but rather how many good leaders they leave behind who can go even further” (p. 114). Although Fullan and Senge champion the idea that systems thinking is a major pillar of learning organizations, further research is needed that can shed light on how school districts practically develop system thinkers in action. Although Fullan (2006) asserted that some do exist, he

maintained that a critical mass is needed for school systems to move towards becoming learning organizations. According to Putnik and Eijnatten (2004), “learning is a dynamic, non-linear, emergent process in which knowledge is created through the interaction of interdependent people” and “learning and innovation are tightly coupled” (p. 491). With learning being so closely linked to leadership in learning organizations, systems thinking helps to produce new leaders throughout the organization. This continual building of individual and collective capacity throughout the organization allows for leadership to be distributed among many individuals rather than a few within the organization’s upper echelons (Timperley, 2005).

### **Distributive Leadership**

The concept of leaders as systems thinkers has support from distributive leadership research. Consensus in the literature has been reached regarding the impossibility of the lone educational leader with an exceptional vision and heroic action successfully transforming schools; nor are principals willing to take on such a hopeless task (Copland, 2003; Corcoran et al., 2001; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan, 2006; Honig, 2012; Marzano et al., 2005; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Timperley, 2005). Copland (2003) describes distributive leadership as having several mainstays. First, the theory suggests that school improvement must be accomplished collectively rather than by one individual. Second, changing the culture within a school system requires a fundamental restructuring of the roles and processes of school leadership. Third, distributive leadership calls for “continual inquiry” into the processes and work of schools, which requires a focus on student learning, high standards, equity, and best

educational practices. Copland contends that “this process of inquiry does not cease; rather, the work is best thought of as an ongoing effort to build greater capacity” (p. 376).

Copland explains:

This tenet suggests a model for leadership as a set of functions or qualities shared across a much broader segment of the school community that encompasses administrators, teachers and other professionals and community members both internal and external to the school. Such an approach imposes the need for school communities to create and sustain broadly distributed leadership systems, processes and capacities (p. 376).

Copland studied a large-scale school reform effort that emphasized distributed leadership called the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC). This five-year reform initiative sought to “reculture” schools in the San Francisco Bay area by focusing on strategies to transform internal cognitive structures, as well as shaping and supporting the organizational structures and systems in which individuals within the system worked to improve their practice. BASRC aimed to build a culture in which people continually built their professional capacity by engaging in a “cycle of inquiry.” This recurring process was designed to help schools learn about the degree to which they accomplished their goals regarding reform efforts and student achievement. Copland described the cycle of inquiry as a multistep process:

The first two steps have to do with selecting and narrowing a question for investigation. The next step is to identify measurable goals. This step recognizes that setting specified targets as measures for success is critical in determining the

success or failure of an action. The fourth and fifth steps include creating and implementing a particular action--connecting knowing and doing. The sixth step is to collect and analyze results from the data generated by the action taken (p. 380).

The study found that individuals in formal leadership roles, such as principals, served as reform coordinators, who functioned as catalysts for change early in the reform process. Much like Senge's (1990) concept of system's thinkers, these reform coordinators served to distribute leadership throughout the system. Although this finding regarding the ability for schools to build capacity for reform through distributive leadership is promising, the study also found that "in virtually all cases, BASRC Leadership Schools used a portion of grant funds to hire a coordinator whose primary responsibility focuses on the reform effort" (Copland, 2003, p. 388). However, it remains unclear how leaders within the school system function as collective capacity builders while simultaneously performing routine, bureaucratic functions.

An empirical study by Timperley (2005) focused on leadership activities of campus principals and how they were distributed as well as how distributed leadership was important in fostering the instructional aspects of leadership. In this study elementary schools in New Zealand involved in a school literacy improvement initiative were investigated.

Timperley found that the "heroic" leaders in the study were the literacy leaders who were closely linked to the classroom teachers and continually offered assistance by encouraging them to question and change their literacy instruction for those students who

were not succeeding. The project changed the role of the literacy leaders through boundary spanning activities that enable the literacy leaders to build their relationship with the teachers. These literacy leader and teacher partnerships enabled the change the reform effort required, particularly in the area of teacher buy-in. However, the author noted that the achievement of coherence across the organization in ways that promoted student achievement was particularly challenging. Although coherence was successfully accomplished in all the schools involved in the project in the early stages, it was not sustainable for all four years.

The Copland (2003) and the Timperley (2005) studies focused on distributive leadership across schools, though Timperley only studied elementary schools. All the schools studied were engaged in specific reform projects. This research focused on the importance campus leaders play regarding distributive leadership, but did not investigate the connections between central office administrators and campus principals and how the operational relationship can foster the development of organizational learning within the school district.

In another study, Halverson and Clifford (2013) focused on how high school principals applied distributive leadership functions to create learning environments for teachers and students (Halverson & Clifford, 2013). The study examined the relationships between the high school principal and key teacher leaders and the role the relationships play to promote and sustain reform. However, the study did not examine the operational relationships, or potential relationships, between superintendents, central office administrators, and campus principals. The resulting distributive leadership

framework developed by Halverson and Clifford, which parallels Senge's (1990) systems thinking and Fullan's (2006) systems thinkers in action regarding an organization's ability to continually foster learning and capacity development, provides a foundation for future research into how leaders use tools and routines to develop leadership capacity in others within their schools. However, it does provide a framework for investigation of the linkages that connect executive-level district administrators with elementary school principals and how those linkages further organizational learning. Conversely, Lasky (2004) developed a model of system linkages that can be used to examine the connections, or pathways between two units within a system and how districts use these linkages to balance administrative controls while encouraging professional learning and collaboration.

### **Lasky's Model of System Linkages**

Lasky's (2004) framework of system linkages was used to examine the connection mechanisms that exist to partner superintendents, executive-level central office administrators, and elementary school principals as well as how the operational relationships encourage the district's development towards a learning organization. According to Lasky (2004), understanding interdependence between organizations and individuals in a policy implementation process or reform system requires research that examines the linkages across the system that connects people, resources, and organizations (p. 2). The learning organization model was therefore particularly appropriate when looking for ways to conceptualize organizational connections and linkages between organizational units to foster continuing responsiveness, effectiveness,

and flexibility in education administration as well as continual learning of its members. Superintendents and central office administrators work in bureaucratic systems but possess a unique potential to employ learning organization processes when working with campus principals (Honig, 2012).

Organizations comprise interrelated systems that have interconnected parts, are reliant on each other, and influence each other through different processes (Senge, 1990). Although previous research has conceptualized these processes as linkages that can serve as the connectors to promote professionalism and organizational learning, the relationships between executive-level central office administrators and elementary school principals for the expressed purpose of fostering capacity development, systems thinking, and adaptive leadership within the organization, especially when the central office administrators have additional regulatory responsibilities (Honig, 2012), had not been examined. Lasky (2004) identified the following pathways, or linkages which can be used to systemically analyze the connection between two otherwise disconnected units within an organization:

Structural. Structural linkages refer to those from state and federal policy domains that affect education, how education and reform is funded, and the role of accountability systems, as with funding to support schools or policy mandates.

Formal. Formal linkages refer to official communications sent between policy domains that pertain to reform implementation, as with any notification or document sent from one agency to another to plan meetings or to confirm progress.



Informal. Informal linkages refer to communications that are not official, yet pertain to reform implementation, as with telephone calls or email messages between colleagues.

Relational. Relational linkages refer to the ties that are formed in an effort to implement or block reform, as occurs when district leaders work with friends or professional colleagues in the community to develop partnerships, or when political alliances are developed to block or support reform implementation.

Ideological. Ideological linkages refer to conceptual bridges that make it possible to change an individual's negative attitude toward reform into one of acceptance and willingness to embrace reform purposes and goals. This is especially important when reform stakeholders hold different beliefs about the purposes of reform.

Temporal. Temporal linkages refer to continuity of reform efforts. Reform efforts can go through phases and may have different elements over time, but can remain guided by the same core principles, goals, and values (pp. 4-5).

Lasky's research identified these linkages to help comprehend how the educational system is interrelated, how resources and communication flow through the linkages, and what resources need to move across them to increase organizational capacity to support school improvement. This conceptual framework theorizes the education system as interconnected and focuses on systemic connections to clarify how the education system works as a whole, and how relational, structural, formal and informal communication, resource, and ideological processes move through the system.

In Lasky's model, a linkage is "a bridge" in that it creates the connection between two otherwise separate units. The model provides a framework to "systematically analyze the linkages that exist across the system and how resources and communication move across these linkages" (Lasky, 2004, p. 2).

Lasky's research included an extensive review of the American literature on reform efforts to improve teaching and learning for culturally and linguistically diverse students as well as a longitudinal study that evaluated the implementation of Comprehensive School Reform designs in three states (Lasky, 2004). The research aimed to answer the following questions: What systemic linkages seem to be most effective and what systemic linkages seem to be least effective in school improvement? And in what areas can capacity be developed to support systemic linkages in the school improvement process? Lasky (2004) found that capacity exists within interconnected domains of an organization as well as within individuals. She identified that capacity for reform implementation comprises three types of capacity: individual capacity, collective capacity, and material capacity.

In a learning organization, individuals bring their own capacity, which includes their personal commitment, their individual disposition to learn about instruction and to view learning as ongoing. Individual capacity encompasses a person's "beliefs, values, knowledge, skill, identity, and past experiences" (Lasky, 2004, p. 4). An organization also has a collective capacity that, according to Lasky, is the sum of the capacities of the individuals within a group. It consists of partnerships, and relations between individuals within the organization that result from a predominance of norms such as trust and

collaboration. Collective capacity also includes the collective skills and knowledge of the organization's individuals. Material capacity refers to the material resources within an organization such as financial resources, time, the physical conditions, technology, and professional development materials.

The model purports that the skill, knowledge, beliefs, and individual and collective inclinations of the people within an organization, as well as the material resources available to achieve the task of reform efforts intended to improve teaching and learning within the system affects the way linkages are used, strengthened, or ignored. Since varying capacities within the different individuals and domains of an organization are connected by the linkages, they are an imperative component of capacity building, which in turn is essential for an organization to move from bureaucratic to a learning organization (Jamali et al., 2006). Specifically, the linkages were used to investigate the ways in which superintendents, executive-level central office administrators, and elementary school principal relationships are aligned with organizational learning principles and how the administrators perceive structural, resource, communication, relational, and ideological linkages as bureaucratic controls and/or professional capacity building.

Vital operational relationships within organizations can be formal and informal communication, structural, and temporal linkages. For example, Lasky found that resource partnerships that focus on bringing personnel and/or materials to schools are a relational linkage. School improvement requires money to hire personnel who can collaborate with schools who are "capable of increasing leadership capacity, teacher

content, and pedagogical skill and knowledge” (Lasky, 2004, p. 7). Learning relationships are key formal, relational, and temporal linkages for increasing system-wide capacity to support reform and increased learning by providing both formal and informal educational sessions and using professional development models that are site-based and integrated into the work day. Problem-solving relationships, which encompass relational, formal, and informal communication linkages, synchronize efforts across organizational levels to develop problem-solving and planning capacity to implement or adapt reform efforts. Lasky’s research found that “some reform leaders at higher levels in the policy system have created partnerships with outside experts to help them envision, plan, and implement improved learning and teaching” (Lasky, 2004, p. 10), but did not determine precisely how they built operational relationships with campus-level leaders.

Relational linkages are personal relationships built on trust and mutual respect and can influence capacity building. According to Lasky (2004), “teachers are more likely to be receptive to external intervention when they trust and feel respected by the people providing professional development or introducing intervention strategies” (p. 11). DuFour and Marzano’s notion that “the best way to improve the effectiveness of individual educators is not, however, through individualistic strategies that reinforce educator isolation” (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 67). For collaboration to increase individual and collective capacity, it must be supported through the powerful relationships of people who share values and a sense of purpose (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan, 2006; Marzano et al., 2005).

The relational linkages are a powerful mechanism for organizations to shift from bureaucratic to learning institutions; however, Lasky (2004) found that if relationships focus on maintaining the status quo, the relational linkages can hinder reform. However, the relational linkage can strengthen the ideological linkage, which aligns values, vision, and goals of the individuals and organizational units within the system. The ideological linkage is important since “creating a shared vision or sense of purpose can mean that ideological chasms need to be bridged” (Lasky, 2004, p. 11). Lasky pointed out that if the ideological linkage is not strong, change is unlikely to be successful.

Inherent in the model’s conceptualization of systems within an organization as mutually supporting one another are the reflective and revitalization processes of increasing capacity for reform. In this context-sensitive system, individuals within organizations are continually and actively adapting while remaining connected to the larger whole. As people begin to reconsider how organizations can cultivate and coordinate the human and material resources required to support improved teaching and learning opportunities, capacity is increased individually and collectively throughout the system (Lasky, 2004). Lasky theorized that the conditions exist for effective teaching and robust learning when the necessary linkages are in place for resources and communication to move effectively across these linkages and all organizations throughout the education system have high levels of individual, collective, and material capacity for reform.

Although Lasky’s work with system linkages studied how they are effective for connecting policy domains to foster sustainable school reform, other researchers have

adapted and used the model to investigate the concept of system linkages that serve as critical mechanisms that connect the central office bureaucracy specifically to schools. For instance, Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) examined how linkages between central office and schools within a large urban district served as bureaucratic controls and mechanisms to foster professionalism and organizational learning. Qualitative data were obtained from interviews, focus groups, observations, field notes, and district documents and analyzed to examine how Lasky's resource, structural, communication, relational, and ideological linkages interacted in response to three reform efforts implemented by the school district.

Previous researchers found that a key component to achieving successful reform was attending to both the bureaucratic elements of an organization as well as the learning, or professional dimension (Johnson and Chrispeels, 2010). The structural, communication, resource, relationship, and ideological linkages that join the central office with its schools play an essential role in aiding the administrative control functions of the organization as well as the professional and learning-centric processes (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). An unexpected finding was that the linkages sometimes functioned to strengthen, or create a pathway for the other linkages, thus opening the door for increasing capacity. Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) described how the relational linkage appeared to be an essential component for successful reform:

In this district, once a trusting relationship between the central office and schools was restored, the groundwork seemed to have been laid for other linkages and pathways to be used to support reform. The shift in 1 year of improved

relationships among team members and between team members and central office staff indicates that the district can draw on a strong relational linkage. The relational linkage seems to mitigate some of the team members' concerns with the administrative directives and to open the door to new learning (p. 766).

Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) also explained that although the strengthening of the relational and communication linkages produced increased ideological coherence among stakeholders within the district concerning the goal of increasing student achievement, a rift in the ideological linkage regarding how to achieve the goal existed. This study revealed that without agreement on how to raise student achievement, teachers viewed instructional assistance as administrative directives rather than as opportunities for professional growth.

### **Analysis of the Literature**

Even though all people have the capability to learn and improve their professional practice, the structures in which they have to work often do not contribute to systems thinking and collaboration, especially if they work within bureaucratic organizations. Thus, people may lack the tools and guiding ideas to make sense of the situations they face independently. According to Fullan (1995), school districts that wish to expand their capacity to operate as learning organizations require a fundamental paradigm shift among their members. The establishment of collaborative operational relationships may assist these organizations to connect different units within the school district in order to foster continual leadership development and organizational learning. Distributive leadership focuses on the practice of leadership as systems thinking, continual capacity

development, and how those practices create collaborative learning networks across organizational boundaries. The literature reveals that in a system that operates as a web of interdependence, leadership that promotes the collective capability to co-construct knowledge for the purpose of achieving important outcomes is more appropriate than hierarchical leadership where standardization and conformity are the organizing principles.

For example, Senge et al. (2007) conducted an ethno-methodological study and found that the relational component is vital to build sustainable collaborative change initiatives. The study also found a strong connection between collaboration and innovation. When the studied sustainability networks spend time fostering relationships through deep, meaningful dialogue among its members, collaboration increased and resulted in sustainable solutions to complex problems. This research studied sustainable networks facilitated by the Sustainability for Organizational Learning, which worked with large sectors of the business world, but did not study educational systems or leadership partnerships within school districts.

Honig's studies have examined the relationship between the central office bureaucracies and reform efforts such as the implementation of small autonomous schools (Honig, 2009) and how executive-level administrators connected with high school principals in large urban districts to support their instructional leadership (Honig, 2012). These studies found that the central office plays an important role in the success of school reform when central office participation in implementation involves activities consistent with "bridging" and "buffering." Central office support provided to schools



was effective when relationships were strong and when central office administrators use linkages to communicate with and provide resources to campuses and simultaneously protect schools from bureaucratic impediments.

Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) studied linkages between the central office and its schools that supported and constrained school reform. They found that the imbalance between the structural and relational linkages created an environment in which reform sustainability was hindered. Another finding was the need for ideological coherence. Weaknesses with the ideological linkage produced gaps in professional learning just as a weak relational linkage stalled organizational collaboration.

Although the literature regarding educational learning organizations has produced evidence that systems thinking and collaboration may provide reform sustainability as well as an ability for learning organizations to foster continual leadership development, operational relationships between superintendents, executive-level central office administrators, and elementary school principals within mid-sized school districts that exhibit the collaborative and systems thinking principles of a learning organization had not been investigated. Further inquiry was necessary to better understand how strategic collaboration between central office and campus leaders foster organizational learning and how linkages support such a phenomenon.

## **Summary**

This chapter presented a brief explanation of bureaucratic organizations and how school districts maintain elements of institutionalization through mandates, program creation, rules, monitoring procedures, and restrictions on discretionary decision making.

This bureaucratization of school districts is largely due to the restrictive nature of federal and state legislative reform efforts, which aim to increase student achievement through increased school and district regulations and accountability. The chapter also explored the literature related to organizational learning and how school districts require systems thinkers in action who possess an ability to understand and operate in the wider system as well as leading their own organizational units. Fullan and Senge both take seriously the notion of distributed leadership by asserting that good leaders produce more good leaders who can go even further and thus foster continual individual and collective capacity development within the organization.

The chapter also described Lasky's (2004) model of system linkages, which was used as a conceptual framework for this study. The linkages are connections between two otherwise disconnected points and are expressions of existing capacity in an organization as well as a feature of continual capacity building. They can be formal or informal communications between leaders, structural linkages such as funding streams, relational such as collaborative partnerships built on mutual trust, ideological as in alignment of beliefs and values, and temporal linkages which foster sustainability. The chapter identified that a gap in the literature exists in relation to how the linkages between the central office administrator and elementary school principal foster organizational learning. Chapter three will describe the methodology and research design used for the study.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology and Procedures**

With federal and state legislation emphasizing high-stakes testing and accountability, districts react by increasing bureaucratic measures rather than increasing their ability to function as learning organizations (Adler & Borys, 1996; Dee et al., 2013; Gay, 2007; Jamali et al., 2006). A foundational feature of organizational learning is the distribution of leadership and the ability of its leaders to form operational relationships in order to achieve better results (Fullan, 2005; Fullan, 2006; Halverson & Clifford, 2013; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Marzano et al., 2005; Senge, 1990). Since principals cannot carry the burden of school improvement and reform alone, this study set out to elucidate the significant linking behaviors employed by superintendents, executive-level central office administrators, and elementary school principals to create operational relationships for the purpose of increasing systems thinking and distributed leadership.

To this end, this chapter describes the research methodology and procedures selected for this study. Details will be provided on the research method and design, description of the organization and participants selected, data collection instruments and procedures, and analysis of the data employed.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

Research has revealed that although campus-level leadership plays an important role in the improvement of teaching and learning within schools, the task has become too complex to be carried out without assistance (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Halverson & Clifford, 2013). District central office administrators can offer essential support to campus principals to foster their instructional leadership

capacity, achieve sustainable school reform efforts, and create connections that can proliferate systems thinking across the organization (Honig, 2012; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Fullan, 2006; Lasky, 2004; Senge, 1990); however, the ways in which the superintendents, central office executive-level administrators, and elementary school principals actually build operational relationships had not been thoroughly examined and required additional study. Therefore, this study focused on how the district central office administrators and elementary school principals build operational relationships and how the relationships reflect organizational learning.

### **Research Questions**

This study attempted to answer the following questions:

- 1) What operational relationships exist between central office administrators and elementary school principals?
- 2) How are the existing operational relationships built?
- 3) To what extent do the relationships reflect the attributes of organizational learning?

### **Method and Design**

Educational researchers, along with other researchers of the social sciences, approach research from distinct epistemological perspectives. This divide goes beyond simply methodological differences such as the use of qualitative versus quantitative practices, but lies between the objectivist and interpretivist thinkers' worldviews (Crotty, 1998, p. 15). Researchers must fully understand their own theoretical perspectives when making epistemological-based decisions since they will not only impact their methods

but also the legitimacy of their results. As Pallas (2001) stated, “Epistemologies are central to the production and consumption of educational research. Since epistemologies undergird all phases of the research process, “engaging with epistemology is integral to learning the craft of research” (p. 6).

Since this study aimed to provide an in-depth description of the operational relationships between district central office administrators and elementary school principals, how the operational relationships are built, and in what way the relationships reflect organizational learning, a qualitative approach was employed. Mertens (2010) defines qualitative research the following way:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p. 225).

Exploring a multi-dimensional and complex phenomenon such as relationships between leaders at different levels of an organization required interpretation of contextual information as well as the use of inductive logic. Although interpretive, phenomenology is a research methodology used for qualitative studies in which interviews with one or a few people are analyzed and interpreted (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Exploration of a

multifaceted system of linkages that exist and work to nurture operational relationships gives credence to a phenomenological approach since the first-hand experiences and thoughts of the participants were used to derive meaning.

In the interpretivist theory, meaning is not objective, certain, free of bias, and inherent in objects needing to be discovered; meaning is constructed by thinkers and applied to objects that already have the potential for meaning (Crotty, 1998). Since meaning is constructed by thinkers it is not universal or inherent in words or objects. As Guba and Lincoln (1994) point out, “Realities are apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible, mental constructions, socially and experientially based” (p. 110), which yields multiple realities, or “truths.” These realities are constructed through hermeneutical methods employed by the researcher. Reality is not absolute, but is a product of human thought and reason; reality can evolve as the thinkers become more sophisticated in their dialectically informed ability to inquire, and thus, construct new meaning. The researcher is not an objective observer but instead interacts with the observed in order to collect data interactively. The researcher influences the object and the object the researcher. This is necessary in educational research that involves people being studied since the art and science of interpretation is subjective in nature. Crotty (1998) stated, “The focus is on an individual’s ability to employ a large range of tools and methods, even unconventional ones, and therefore on his or her inventiveness, resourcefulness and imaginativeness” (p. 49). Thus, the interpretivist theoretical framework allows the researcher to explore the social construction of reality by developing a rich, complex picture of the phenomenon being studied.

The interpretive approach known as phenomenology was used for this study since it attempts to describe and derive understanding of an experience from the participants' perceptions (Mertens, 2010). In the case of this study, the relationships formed between superintendents, deputy or assistant superintendents, and elementary school principals were explored paying attention to how participants interpret contextual factors such as the influence of federal and state legislation, size of the district, and competing responsibilities such as regulatory responsibilities and leadership development.

As a result of using a qualitative phenomenological design for this study, generalizability is limited. As Mertens (2010) points out, "the key characteristic of phenomenology is the study of the way in which members of a group or community themselves interpret the world and life around them" (p. 235). The meaning derived from this study's participants' perceptions and how they describe their relationships may not be extrapolated and applied to all central office administrator and elementary school principal relationships. Each context has its own particular reality, leaving it to the reader to determine the transferability by determining "the degree of similarity between the study site and the receiving context" (Mertens, 2010, p. 259). For this study, the aim of the researcher was only to discover the meaning of the relationships between the participants themselves and to provide thick descriptions in order to promote transferability.

Since the researcher conducted all interviews for this study and holds a position as an elementary school principal, an insider's perspective was brought to the interviewing and data analysis process. Interviewing within one's own "cultural" community, as an

insider, gave the researcher a degree of social proximity that can increase awareness among both the researcher and participants of the social phenomenon under investigation (Ganga & Scott, 2006). The researcher recognizes the potential bias inherent in this study's design since the researcher holds his own perceptions of the study's topic as an insider.

### **Selection of Participants**

Participants for this study were recruited using a combination of criterion sampling and snowball sampling and selected from mid-sized suburban public school districts in Texas. Criterion sampling, according to Patton, studies cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance and are assumed to be information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under investigation and will therefore produce generalizable results (1990). Snowball sampling refers to the researcher choosing a participant and then asking that participant for additional participants who meet the criteria of the study (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Once the district was chosen, the district's superintendent was asked to refer the researcher to an executive-level administrator such as a deputy or assistant superintendent who works directly with the superintendent and elementary school principals. The superintendent was also asked to refer to the researcher two elementary school principals who meet the criteria and who exhibit the qualities, according to the superintendent, of organizational learning.

Two school districts were selected based on the following specific criteria. They each had a mid-size population between 8,000 and 15,000 students. The districts also



had to meet the state's standard according to the Texas Education Agency Department of Assessment and Accountability Division of Performance Report found online at <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/2013/statelist.pdf> in all four possible distinction categories. The categories included Student Achievement, Student Progress, Closing Performance Gaps, and Post-Secondary Readiness.

The researcher contacted the superintendent of the selected school districts and a brief explanation of the study was given. Each superintendent then referred the researcher to an executive-level administrator within the school district with whom he or she works and with whom he or she, according to the superintendent, has an operational relationship with two elementary school principals in such a way that the principals' leadership capacity is positively impacted. The researcher then contacted each administrator through email explaining the study and offered an invitation to participate. The researcher set up an initial individual meeting with the administrators to obtain written consent to participate in the study. The study participants comprised two sets of administrators from two school districts including the district superintendents, one executive-level district administrator from each district, and two elementary school principals from each district. One of the executive-level district administrators had the title of deputy superintendent and the other assistant superintendent. Both the deputy and assistant superintendents directly supervised the elementary school principal participants in their respective districts. A total of eight participants were interviewed.

Age, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic background was not considered for eligibility in this study. Since more than two principals within the districts met the

criteria, the researcher asked the district superintendent to select only two principals who exhibit the values of organizational learning and who have a good working relationship with their supervisor.

The superintendents for this study had served as the district's superintendent for at least five years. The year in which the study was conducted was considered as one of the five years of experience. Each assistant superintendent and elementary school principal participant had a minimum of three years of public school administrative experience. Only principals who met the experience and campus level requirements were enlisted to participate.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

The main source of data for this study was individual interviews. Each of the participants were interviewed once face-to-face in a researcher/participant agreed upon location. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all eight participants. According to Merriam and Simpson (2000), interviews are predominantly useful when the topic involved is "complex and emotionally loaded" (p. 152). Semi-structured questions allow for participants to be uninhibited in the information they offer and opportunity for the researcher to discover what is known about the phenomenon from the insider's perspective. According to Chenail (2011), by using discovery-oriented research instruments such as semi-structured open-ended interview protocols, "qualitative researchers tend to construct study-specific sets of questions that are open-ended in nature so the investigators provide openings through which interviewees can contribute

their insiders' perspectives with little or no limitations imposed by more closed-ended questions" (p. 255).

Care was taken to provide the participants with anonymity in order to provide participants with as much freedom to share their perceptions concerning the phenomenon of central office and campus leader relationships. The interviews were semi-structured, focused interviews using prepared, open-ended questions as well as follow up questions that arose naturally from the interviews. The interview protocol was revised and approved by the researcher's chair before used with participants.

Another source of data used was documents. Documents were the researcher's field notes as well as letters, emails, and other forms of print communication written by the participants to each other as well as district data reports for the most recent three years. Analysis of documents "involves the study of existing documents, either to understand their substantive content or to illuminate deeper meanings which may be revealed by their style and coverage" (Ritchie, 2003, p. 35). Archival documents related to the central office administrator and principals' work strategy were also reviewed in order to obtain information related to the system linkages.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The online research training modules offered by the Office of Research Support (ORS) at The University of Texas were successfully completed by the researcher in order to follow the Institution Review Board (IRB) process. Proper formal permission from the IRB office was acquired at The University of Texas at Austin. All research methods and materials were submitted to the International Review Board (IRB) for approval before the

researcher initiated participant recruitment. Formal approval from the school district prior to any contact with participants was also obtained. Verbal consent was sought by each participant. The school district's superintendent identified one central office executive-level administrator and two elementary school principals who met the established criteria. The superintendent referred participants were initially invited by email to participate in the study. An initial meeting with each potential participant was held in order to provide an overview of the study, copies of the semi-structured interview guide, obtain written consent, and to establish a rapport with each participant. Prior reading of the interview guide was given to help participants produce more thorough, in-depth responses. The researcher recognized that prior reading of the interview guide could also influence a predetermined response.

The researcher and participants mutually reached agreement when selecting the site for each interview. The location was one in which the participant felt comfortable in order to provide a greater sense of confidence and trust in the interviewing process. Where the participants' live and work was considered when selecting a convenient location. Each participant was interviewed face-to-face individually by the researcher. The researcher had a notepad and pen on hand in order to take anecdotal notes during the interviewing process. With the participant's permission, each interview was audio-recorded using the researcher's iPhone 6 Voice Memos application and transcribed by a paid transcriber.

In order to promote trustworthiness, the participants had the opportunity to verify transcriptions afterwards to provide any clarifications to their interview and to ensure that

the transcripts accurately captured the spirit of their responses. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that participant feedback is the most essential technique for establishing credibility because it provides the opportunity to assess what participants intended by allowing them to judge accuracy, gives participants the opportunity to correct and challenge perceived misinterpretations, and enables participants to offer additional information.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The interview recordings were transcribed soon after each session using the professional transcription agency Rev Voice Recorder: Audio Transcription and Dictation Application for the iPhone. The transcripts were printed for coding as follows. Each line on each transcript was numbered. The superintendent interviews were coded with the letter S-A and S-B in the upper right hand corner of each sheet referring to the superintendent from district A and the superintendent from district B. The same procedure was used for the executive-level administrator interview transcriptions. The letters AS-A and AS-B were used to refer to the assistant superintendents from each district (e.g., AS-A = Assistant Superintendent from district A). Principal interviews were coded with the letter P and a number for each principal and the letters A and B for each district (e.g., P1-A = Principal 1 from district A) in the upper right hand corner of each sheet. The researcher also took anecdotal notes throughout each interview. Data is stored in the researcher's personal files and in password protected files on his computer. Access is limited to the researcher.

Two types of coding processes were used for data analysis: initial coding and axial coding. Initial coding provides a general type of analysis for wide review by breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts and “is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 81). Axial coding is narrower than initial coding and identifies relationships of initial coding and describes and categorizes properties and dimensions. These two coding techniques worked together to refine the data analysis process (Saldaña, 2009).

For this study, the researcher created a set of start codes derived from Lasky’s model of system linkages and conducted a preliminary coding of each of the eight interview transcripts and notes. The researcher added to the start code list using any additional core concepts or categories that emerged after the initial coding process. Once complete, the original code list was expanded to encompass the additional codes. The researcher reviewed this new code book with one of the members of his committee. This modified code book was then used to reexamine the data from all eight interviews for the axial coding phase.

## **Summary**

This interpretivist phenomenological study used semi-structured, open-ended interviews to develop rich, context-based descriptions of the working relationships between superintendents, central office administrators, and elementary school principals as well as description of the linkages that were used to connect them and foster continued instructional leadership development. Qualitative research uses descriptive language and constantly seeks in-depth details about the topic (Mertens, 2010). All information

gathered was focused around the operational relationships between administrators within two school districts from their own perspectives. The study was designed to allow for a thorough and comprehensive investigation. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with administrators working in two successful, mid-sized school districts as measured through TEA's accountability measures. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for emerging themes and cross referenced using Lasky's (2004) model of system linkages.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

The purpose of this study was to determine what operational relationships exist within school districts, which continually build administrator leadership capacity, nurture distributive leadership and systems thinking, and thus foster the district's progression towards organizational learning. Using the methods presented in the previous chapter, the following research questions were addressed:

- 1) What operational relationships exist between central office administrators and elementary school principals?
- 2) How are the existing operational relationships built?
- 3) To what extent do the relationships reflect the attributes of organizational learning?

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the findings of the study. The following areas are included: an overview of the two districts in which the participants work, a description of the participants, and results according to the three research questions. Lasky's (2004) concept of system linkages was adapted and used to explore four linkages that seem to assist as important mechanisms that bond the administrators of a school district—in this case the links between the superintendent, executive-level assistant administrator, and two elementary school principals. Findings from this study of how two district's linkages between administrators functioned to build the operational relationships and promote organizational learning are also described. The chapter concludes with a summary and a brief preview of chapter five.



## **The School Districts**

Initially, it is pertinent to clarify that pseudonyms were given to each participant, school district, and school to protect their anonymity. Furthermore, some other identifiable details about the participants, school districts, and elementary campuses are either concealed or omitted throughout the study. Some quotes throughout the study have been minimally altered to protect participants' identities. These omitted sections have been indicated by brackets or blanks.

The two districts in which the study's participants work are described below. This information serves the purpose of providing the context in which the administrator participants develop their operational relationships.

Casterly ISD is a mid-sized district located near a major metropolitan area in Texas and stretches across 174 square miles of both suburban and rural areas. It serves over 11,000 students on 15 campuses that serve pre-kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. Casterly ISD demographics comprise 88 percent free or reduced lunch students, 33 percent who are limited English speakers, and 66 percent of students who are considered at-risk of dropping out of school. 82 percent of the district's students are Hispanic, 10 percent are African-American, and only 6 percent are White.

In addition to the superintendent, the district also has the superintendent's executive leadership team, referred to as the "cabinet." The cabinet comprises the chief technology officer, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, the

assistant superintendent for finance and operations, the assistant superintendent for human resources, and the director of communications and community relations. Casterly ISD is made up of 8 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, and one large high school with an enrollment of over 2600 students and an economically disadvantaged population of 81 percent. It also has the following non-traditional schools: the Disciplinary Alternative Education Program, the Child Development Center, which is an early childhood center serving employee children, children from teen parents, and qualifying children from the community, and the Opportunity Center, a credit recovery school for high school students who fall behind on credits.

Riverrun ISD is located adjacent to a large city and spans 117 square miles. It has a population of approximately 9,200 students with only 12.6 percent of enrolled students who are eligible for the free or reduced lunch program. 26 percent of the district's students are considered at-risk of dropping out of school and 6 percent are limited English proficient. The two largest student demographic populations are White, at nearly 78 percent, and Hispanic, which is approaching 20 percent.

The superintendent's executive leadership team, or cabinet, consists of the deputy superintendent, who oversees all the principals, the district's legal counsel, the assistant superintendent for human resources, assistant superintendent for business and finance, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, and the director of communications, media, and community relations. The director of technology also joins cabinet meetings when appropriate. Riverrun ISD encompasses 6 elementary schools, 2

middle schools, 1 high school with a student enrollment of over 2400 and an economically disadvantaged population of 10 percent. It also has a Leader-For-Life program, which is a comprehensive student wellness initiative that aims to strengthen the district's current substance abuse prevention efforts by empowering students to lead a drug and alcohol-free lifestyle. One of the factors that prompted the district to develop such a program was a concerning level of drug use among Riverrun high school students after a 2013 survey determined that approximately 35 percent of 10th to 12th grade students reported using marijuana in the preceding thirty days, compared to the national average of 20.5 percent.

Comparatively, both Casterly ISD and Riverrun ISD have experienced significant growth in the last five years, but Riverrun has undergone a much more rapid increase. From 2010 to 2015 Casterly ISD increased by 1,608 students, while Riverrun ISD increased by 2, 220. Casterly's five-year population percent change from 2010 to 2015 was a modest 15.8, while Riverrun's exploded at 33.75 percent, making it one of the five fastest growth districts in the state.

Table 1: The School Districts

	<b>Casterly ISD</b>	<b>Riverrun ISD</b>
Type of District	Suburban/Rural	Suburban
Square Miles	174	117
Student Population	11,000	9,000
5 Year Growth Rate	15.8%	33.75%
Eco. Dis.	88%	12.6%
Limited English	33%	26%
At-Risk	66%	6%
White	6%	78%
Hispanic	82%	20%
African American	10%	>2%
Elementary Schools	8	6
Middle Schools	3	2
High Schools	1	1

### **The Participants**

Participants from Casterly ISD included the superintendent, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, and two elementary school principals. The

assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction works closely with the district's principals and meets with them for evaluation purposes.

The following offers a brief profile of each participant, including how many years in his or her administrative role, the path to attaining that role, and how he or she is associated with the superintendent. The superintendent from Casterly ISD will be described first followed by Casterly's assistant superintendent and two elementary school principals. The Riverrun ISD participants follow the same pattern beginning with the superintendent, then the deputy superintendent, and followed by the two elementary school principal participants from Riverrun. Finally, each elementary school is presented.

*Donna.* Donna has been an administrator in Casterly ISD for fourteen years serving as the district's director for accountability and assistant superintendent for finance and operations before becoming the district's first female superintendent. She completed her fifth year as Casterly's superintendent at the time of this study. Her educational background includes ESL classroom teacher, service as middle school assistant principal, and program specialist at the Texas Education Agency. She holds a bachelor's of science degree B.S. in Communications and a masters in, a master's degree in secondary and higher education, and a Ph.D. in education administration as well as superintendent certification.

Donna has a long history with Casterly ISD and shared that her mother taught in the district while she was pregnant with her. She expressed regarding the district, "I care

a lot about this district; it's been important to me my whole life." Donna shared that when she was appointed as superintendent there was "a massive shakeup in administration" which allowed her to hire her own cabinet. She stated, "rather than coming in and having to develop a relationship with someone who was already pretty entrenched with how they want to run things, I was able to bring in my own team from scratch, so to speak, and interview people with my own operational style in mind."

*Pam.* Pam was one of Donna's first administrative hires and came on board as the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction after being recommended by a trusted mentor of Donna's. Pam previously worked as an assistant principal, principal and executive director in a large urban school district. She holds a bachelor's, a master's, and a Ph.D. in education. At the time of this study, Pam had worked together with Donna for five years. Although Pam and Donna did not know each other prior to working together, they consider themselves "very good friends" and often spend time socializing outside of the work environment. Pam stated regarding the superintendent, "We could have been pals in college and in high school."

*Vicky.* Vicky was in her second year as principal at the time of this study. She has only worked in Casterly ISD where she began as an elementary school teacher. She considers Donna as an important reason for her professional growth and ascension. She stated, "My relationship with Donna started when I was a teacher and has really grown and developed with her providing me the opportunity to move from a teacher to assistant principal, and then from assistant principal to principal."

Vicky leads Sunset Elementary School, which has a population of 802 students. Sunset pre-kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grades with 39 grade level teachers and an additional five specials teachers: a music, technology, art, and two physical education teachers. In addition, two assistant principals serve at Sunset Elementary. 97 percent of the school's students are considered economically disadvantaged and 44 percent are limited English proficient. Sunset also has a 30.6 percent mobility rate, which means nearly a third of its students move in and out of the school in a given year.

*Emily.* Like Vicky, Emily was also serving as a second year principal at the time of this study. Unlike Vicky, Emily has experience as an assistant principal in several large, urban school districts as well as a stint as an administrator of a charter school before coming to Casterly ISD. She worked in Casterly as an assistant principal of one of the district's middle schools for two years before being appointed by Donna as an elementary school principal.

Emily is principal of West Rock Elementary, a pre-kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade school with an enrollment of 646 students. The school has 34 grade level teachers and an additional five specials teachers consisting of a music teacher, a technology, an art, and two physical education teachers. In addition, two assistant principals serve at West Rock Elementary. 88 percent of West Rock's students are economically disadvantaged, 35 percent are limited English proficient, and it has a mobility rate of 19.4 percent.

Participants in Riverrun ISD included the superintendent, the deputy superintendent, and two elementary school principals. The deputy superintendent supervises all principals in the district.

*Lance.* A former secondary teacher, assistant principal, elementary school principal, executive director, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, and superintendent, Lance earned a Bachelor of Science degree in secondary education, Master of Science in educational administration and doctorate of education degrees. Before joining Riverrun ISD, he served as superintendent of another mid-sized school district of nearly 8,000 students for five years. At the time of this study, Lance was completing his fifth year as superintendent of Riverrun, giving him ten years of experience as a superintendent. Prior to these roles, he served as assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in a large suburban district where he hired Sally, who is his current deputy superintendent, as the coordinator for Language Arts in his department 20 years ago. When speaking of his experience working with Sally in a previous district he referred to her as his “right hand person.”

*Sally.* Sally began her career as an elementary school teacher of gifted and talented students and worked as an elementary assistant principal, principal, curriculum coordinator, director of curriculum, and as an assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Additionally, Sally has served as deputy superintendent for two large suburban school districts. Sally earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education and a Master of Arts degree in gifted education. She has completed superintendent



certification and is near completion on a doctorate of education degree in educational administration.

Sally was hired by Lance in a previous district 20 years ago. She was serving as an elementary school principal and was promoted to curriculum coordinator for language arts. After six years of working together, Lance moved to another district to become superintendent. Sally moved into his vacated role of assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Lance stated of Sally, “She’s done everything in the school business from teacher, assistant principal, principal, director, assistant superintendent, deputy superintendent in two districts.” Unlike the other participants who all had several years in their current district and role, Sally was only completing her first year as deputy superintendent of Riverrun ISD at the time of the study.

*Beth.* Beth began her career in education in 1997 as a secondary science teacher and later worked as an assistant principal before becoming principal. She holds a bachelor’s degree in science and a master’s degree in education administration. Beth was completing her third year as principal at the time of the study. She had already been on the same campus serving as the assistant principal before being promoted to principal by Lance. Beth also served as an administrator in the district’s only high school and taught high school science courses for eleven years prior to that.

Beth is the principal of Trident Elementary School that has a population of 881 students. It is a pre-kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade campus with 37 grade level teachers as well as three specials teachers: a music teacher, a technology, an art, and two physical

education teachers. In addition to the principal, Trident Elementary also has an assistant principal. 45 percent of the school's students are considered economically disadvantaged and 31 percent are limited English proficient. Trident only has an 8.2 percent mobility rate.

*Toni.* Toni began her career as a 3rd grade teacher followed by administrative positions including math facilitator, middle school assistant principal and elementary assistant principal in two different school districts. She earned both a bachelor's degree in education and a master's degree in education administration. Toni was serving her second year as elementary school principal in Riverrun ISD at the time of the study. She came to the district already having been an elementary school principal in a large urban district where she worked in a diverse, high poverty school. Lance hired her into Riverrun after going through a "highly competitive process that began reviewing more than 80 employment applications."

Toni is the principal of Tumble Stone Elementary, a kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade school with an enrollment of 616 students. It has 32 grade level teachers as well as three specials teachers consisting of a music teacher, a physical education teacher, and an art teacher. Tumble Stone also has an assistant principal in addition to the principal. Just five percent of Tumble Stone's students are economically disadvantaged; two percent of students are limited English proficient. The school's mobility rate is 7.4 percent.

Table 2: The Participants from Casterly ISD

	<b>Donna</b>	<b>Pam</b>	<b>Vicky</b>	<b>Emily</b>
Position	Superintendent	Assistant Superintendent	Elementary School Principal	Elementary School Principal
Yrs. in Position	5	5	2	2
Administrative Certifications	Superintendent Principal	Superintendent Principal	Principal	Principal
Degrees Held	BS, MS, Ph.D.	BS, MS, Ph.D.	BS, MS, Ph.D.	BS, MS

Table 3: The Participants from Riverrun ISD

	<b>Lance</b>	<b>Sally</b>	<b>Beth</b>	<b>Toni</b>
Position	Superintendent	Deputy Superintendent	Elementary School Principal	Elementary School Principal
Yrs. in Position	5	1	3	2
Administrative Certifications	Superintendent Principal	Superintendent Principal	Principal	Principal
Degrees Held	BS, MS, Ph.D.	BS, MS	BS, MS	BS, MS

Table 4: Elementary Schools

	Sunset	West Rock	Trident	Tumble Stone
District	Casterly ISD		Riverrun ISD	
Principal	Vicky	Emily	Beth	Toni
Enrollment	802	646	881	616
Eco. Disadvantaged	97%	88%	45%	5%
Limited English	44%	35%	31%	2%
Mobility Rate	30.6%	19.4%	8.2%	7.4%
No. of Teachers	39 Grade Level	34 Grade Level	37 Grade Level	32 Grade Level
	5 Specials	5 Specials	3 Specials	3 Specials

### Research Question One

*What operational relationships exist between central office and elementary school principals?*

Findings for this study's first research question are presented according to five operational relationships derived from the data: hierarchical relationship, mentor relationship, aligned relationship, and social relationship. The concept of system linkages is applied to each of the operational relationships to help provide a descriptive picture of how the finding of the study relate to one another. This conceptual framework also

provides an opportunity to specify and define concepts within the phenomenon of the working affiliations between district and campus administrators (Luse, Mennecke, & Townsend, 2012). The following sections provide an elaboration of each type of relationship along with the different linkages that help describe these connections and supporting data.

### **Hierarchical Relationship: Structural Linkage**

The hierarchical relationship revealed by the data reflect categorized levels of authority and subordination between the participants within the school districts and it reflects a primary structural linkage. This operational relationship may take the following forms: specialization and division of labor and purposeful distance. Interviews with all the participants indicate that the central office administrators and elementary school principals know and could easily articulate the districts' tiered structure beginning with the superintendent down to the campus principals. Beth explained,

Of course it's Dr. L. Then he's got his deputy superintendent and he's got assistant superintendents for finance, human resources, curriculum and instruction. And underneath those categories are...let's say curriculum and instruction. I'll talk about the ones I deal with the most, Curriculum and Instruction, [    ]. Directly under her are coordinators for special education and curriculum. And those are two. For example, under Liz [    ], who is the curriculum coordinator, the Director of Teaching and Learning is what they call her. We have technology. We have testing and curriculum coaches.

Vicky was also able to explain her district's organizational structure by summarizing the flowchart from the superintendent to the campus principals. She stated,

Of course it's the superintendent. Then it's the assistant superintendents and so we've got assistant superintendents for finance, human resources, curriculum and instruction. And underneath those categories are, let's say curriculum and instruction coordinators and other coordinators, then specialists, and then the principals on the campuses.

Specialization and division of labor. Specialization and division of labor is a tenet of Max Weber's bureaucracy theory in which bureaucrats specialize in one area and are hired solely based on professional competency (Jorgensen, 2011). Each specialist does what he or she knows best and then passes the work along to another specialist. Tasks and responsibilities are kept separate and fall within a single, relatively narrow function. The specialization and division of labor within the districts appears to facilitate the dissemination of support for the elementary school principals. Regarding her district's structure, Vicky stated,

I think it's organized in an organized fashion, where every single person at the district office has their responsibilities and their duties, and they respond out. I know if I need help with special education support, I'm going to go to the special education director. If I need help with something related to curriculum instruction, I know there's a team of people, whether it be math or reading or

somebody over the whole program, I know who to go to. From a principal's perspective, I know who to go to for certain things.

Vicky also explained how the specialization and division of labor did not constrain her communication with individuals within the organization. She explained, “Everybody has their role, and I do respect the roles, but I don't by any means feel restricted, like I can't say something or bring something up.” She elaborated regarding communicating with the superintendent:

I'm not going to ask her something I know I should ask my direct supervisor first.

There's an order of things, and things like that. I feel open to going to her, but the role of my supervisor is to take care of things more immediate to the campus.

Not only do the hierarchical relationships established by the districts' structure demarcate the roles and responsibilities, which enhance communication between actors and aid in efficiently providing support for principals, but they also work to hold leaders accountable for specific duties that fall under their authority. One of the superintendent participants described how the specialization and division of labor provided by the hierarchical relationship affords protection for the district through checks and balances in which one administrator can overrule the decisions of another. Donna shared,

We don't decentralize staffing. That's all centralized. We don't give, We're not Austin ISD. We don't give a budget to the principal and say “Do whatever you want.” We do all of it centralized here. I said, “Because of that, I'm going to hold

you responsible, and I'm going to hold Pam responsible.” Seeing signatures on a page, “if you can't tell me exactly what those counts were I don't have confidence. Get with Pam, come back, and show me the charts. In other words, I'm constantly looking to reinforce.” “This is what you should do.” Don't just, “Well, the principal said he needs it.” That's not good enough. That's not going to save you when we go bankrupt and you're in the paper because you don't know how to staff.

Pam illustrated how the specialization and division of labor functions as a checks and balance mechanism. Principals must get approval from different administrators with various central office responsibilities who have the power to authorize certain decisions made by principals. Pam explained,

They don't have complete autonomy. They have curriculum instruction working with them. They have the coordinators and directors. They have the business office. “You can't submit that, or this is the way you need to do it. You can't buy that, it's not allowed from that vendor.” Or you have me in my department saying, “Nope, you don't have a Title 1 funds, you didn't address that as a need. None of it's mentioned in your CIP. So no, you can't spend the money that way.” Then you have HR saying, “You can't hire that person, we've looked into the background, and it's nope,” or “No, you're not going to hire your own person, we're going to have a screening committee to make sure that you get the best candidate, and you don't spend your time screening people.”



Purposeful distance. Data revealed that the district superintendents do not have a day-to-day working relationship with the elementary principals due in large part to the hierarchical arrangement in which the superintendent does not directly supervise the campus principals. However, distancing from the principals is strategically maintained by two of the participants in order to avoid the appearance of favoritism, to allow principals to develop strong operational relationships with other central office administrators, and to allow them to more freely make difficult personnel decisions such as reprimanding or demoting a principal.

Riverrun ISD all principals are supervised by Sally, the deputy superintendent and in Casterly ISD, Pam, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction supervises all the principals. A superintendent stated regarding intentionally keeping distance, “This affords us the opportunity to not have to be involved, because we hire good principals who can run their buildings, and when they need help, they call. Or if they need help, we tend to hear about it.”

The data also revealed several reasons for district administrators establishing purposeful distance with campus principals including a desire to not usurp other relationships that need to be established within the organization, avoiding the appearance of favoritism, and having the distance necessary to make difficult personnel decisions such as demoting an administrator. A primary reason Donna maintains a purposefully distant relationship with the campus principals is to facilitate a better relationship with those central office administrators with whom she feels the principals need to work more

closely. To her, it is a higher priority for the principals to develop a strong operational relationship with Pam, and with the other members of the cabinet. She expressed that she does not want to be a hindrance to those relationships being fostered. She explained,

My purpose is that I need them to have that strong relationship and respect with the cabinet members, because it does no good for this district for everyone to come to me. I make all the decisions, and then I'm gone. There's no structure in place for "Great, now what do we do?"

The intentional creation of these distant relationships was also driven by a desire to avoid the appearance of favoritism that could inadvertently lead to causing conflict between principals. Donna elaborated,

Let's say you're an elementary principal and the superintendent comes down. You're like, "It really would help if my parking lot was re-stripped, because you can see my parents are having trouble." What does the superintendent do? They go back to central office and "Parking lot needs to be re-stripped." You weren't next on the list. They worked out a whole schedule, and now you've gone, now there's dissension amongst ... Now the other principals are mad. How come he gets it? Because he mentioned it to the superintendent.

Donna explained further,

I constantly dealt with things like that in other places, and I'm trying so hard to make sure that that doesn't happen, that we're trying to establish clearer lines so

that people's feelings don't get hurt and we don't get that kind of buildup of all you have to do is go around to this back door and you'll get something.

Although she expressed a need to maintain distance between the superintendent and principals, she revealed an apprehension when she answered her own question during the interview, "Can we improve upon it? Absolutely!" While establishing these hierarchical relationships, Donna described the tension between her desire to maintain distance from the campus principals and developing stronger ties with them. She shared,

I think we're going to constantly work on that balance of how involved should I be, without making it appear that I'm usurping someone else's authority or trying to take over, or being too top-down.

Pam echoed the idea of maintaining purposeful distance with the principals. However, her reasoning was to ensure she is able to make difficult personnel decisions, such as reprimanding a principal, that may be more challenging if a closer relationship has been previously established. She expounded,

They're leaders, so you think about range, making sure that you have that professional line because if something happens, and you have to recommend that they be demoted or something, I've just seen it in others when it became hard for them to do that because they crossed that line. All of a sudden they were going to Spurs games with them.

The data also revealed that purposefully keeping distance goes beyond the superintendent – principal at-work relationship. Donna purposefully maintained distance with campus principals outside of the work environment. She explained,

I don't socialize. I don't know any of them that well. Most of them are either much older or much younger than I am. Outside of school functions, we have lots of school functions where we socialize, but I don't socialize with them. We're not friends. I don't see them. I don't know them that well outside of work.

Sometimes they'll come in, but I wouldn't say it's often.

### **Mentor-Protégé Relationship: Ideological and Relational Linkages**

A working mentor-protégé relationship emerged from the data. This illustrates ideological and relational linkages. The mentor-protégé relationship is characterized by several key components including encouraging the protégé regarding future plans, reflection on practice, open and honest conversations, and facilitating professional growth. The mentors use tools such as focused questioning, and teaching by example to promote the professional growth of their protégés.

The mentor-protégé relationship revealed by the data appears to be a strong relational linkage, which includes trusting professional relationships within and across levels of the system given that the participants serve as mentors and leadership coaches for the participants who they lead. The superintendent participants served as mentors for both the deputy or assistant superintendent and principal participants. For instance, Sally

expressed that Lance had served as her mentor for many years. She stated, “He groomed me and I’ve learned a lot from him.” The deputy and assistant superintendent participants served as mentors for the principal participants. Toni explained how Sally mentors the principals by desiring their professional development. She stated, “She’s constantly asking us about where do you see yourself in five years? Is there any type of leadership opportunity you want to pursue?”

Data from the interviews revealed that the mentor supported the leadership capacity development of the protégé. This mentor-protégé operational relationship centered around three overall themes: promoting others’ professional growth, building trust, and modeling leadership.

*Promoting others’ professional growth.* According to the participants, the mentors encouraged the professional development of the protégés in a variety of ways including connecting them with opportunities for additional training and capacity building, asking focused questions, and creating an environment that encourages risk taking. Further, facilitating and supporting the professional growth of others, both to achieve success within their current position and to ensure success in future positions were important aspects of the mentor-protégé operational relationship. Toni explained how Lance and Sally both influence her professional development. She stated,

Sally has the principles, in general, and she's constantly asking us about where do you see yourself in five years? Is there any type of leadership opportunity you want to pursue? I know that she's closely tied to Lance so I would say the

perception that I'm getting is that we want to see you grow as well. It's about growth. Not in a way where it's, the message is being communicated "We don't think you're doing enough." It's just that we see our leaders as people who can do even more and have the capability of becoming stronger leaders. An example is things get sent out to principals like, "Are you aware that there's a leadership opportunity at Harvard this summer? Would you be interested in pursuing a doctorate degree?" Those are the kind of messages that let you know that there's support in growing you.

The elementary school principal participants had a stronger mentorship relation with the central office administrator who directly supervises them due to the increased interactions. Toni continued,

Being a risk taker is one of my strengths and I feel like I've been allowed and especially by Sally, I've been encouraged, too. I don't think it's because Lance would not encourage me. I just think that I have, because of the fact that she's my immediate supervisor she's going to have more contact with me.

Toni described the mentor-protégé relationship between herself and Sally, her immediate supervisor, as a positive one in which she is encouraged to achieve success and continually think about her leadership through reflection on practice. She elaborated,

You know, when I think about some of the things that I've tried on my campus or I've talked about in these principal meetings, what the results are, there's always

been the impression to ask some questions. Not impression but there's always been a follow up to ask some questions to get you to think about those pieces. It's more of a mentor role and so that leaves the impression that it's okay to keep doing this. If I had been shut down or if I had been scolded or if anything had come out that appeared as punitive, that would make you hesitant, but that's not the reaction. Some things that I've tried have not worked well and I'm willing to be able to put that on the table. It's more like, "Well, what would you do differently?" That's the type of conversions we have at these meetings and I think that's what encourages you to not get stuck on, "Well, this didn't work." It's "Well, what am I going to do differently about this and how am I going to try to change this and massage this so that it will have a likelier chance of success?" I think that's important, that's a key, and so it's an impression but it is based on actions that are being taken on the other end.

Toni explained how the mentor-protégé relationship with her supervisors serves as a catalyst for professional growth. The positive experiences with professional mentors have motivated her to think about her future. She expounded,

Because I've had positive experiences all throughout my administrative career, it makes me, in my own head, think about "How am I going to grow?" Because I'm probably going to keep this career for the remainder of my time that I'm a working person before I retire. I think the more positives you have, it allows you to branch out and think about what's the next level I want to try. I think that

having that positive relationship with your supervisor helps you with that. I think if I had negative experiences with Sally or Lance, I wouldn't be thinking about "What else? What's next?"

The other participants shared similar perceptions regarding the mentor-protégé relationship with their supervisors and their professional growth. Beth stated of Lance, "He is very supportive of me and my professional growth, either into another position or gaining new knowledge and information about curriculum in some way."

Although the data revealed a strong relational linkage between the deputy and assistant superintendents as well as with principals, the superintendents also served as mentors for both the assistant superintendent and principal participants. Vicky shared,

I think Donna wants to build people, to grow people professionally. Speaking from my experience as a leader here, she has done just that. Sustain Casterly ISD, to commit to Casterly, to develop relationships and partner here with the community. To grow and learn every year, there's always something new, but continue to be a lifelong learner. We don't always know everything, there's always something that we can continue to build and develop, and better ourselves every year. That's how I feel like she, that's what I think she would want for me.

Donna also shared,

It is a constant training mindset. We all talk about being lifelong learners, but I think those are just platitudes. I think most people don't embody that. I think most



people really, the longer you're in this business, the more you want to reach homeostasis. This is something I've talked to principals about before.

She added,

I am constantly hammering people. They've been around me long enough now to know I do it because I want you to get better, because I want you to take my job. I don't do it because I just like to get on people.

The data revealed that the mentor-protégé relationship involves training and development for the protégé. Lance spoke of a story of how he helped a deputy superintendent who worked for him grow professionally. He shared,

I don't know if this is a strategy or not, but you think about, what am I asking them to do. Hey, take the lead on and implement the attendance on, the rezoning process, which is, as you know, very emotional in the community. I had done it in a previous district. Had all my materials still, and so, maybe the strategy is, giving them something to do. The alternative would have been “I'm going to do this one and you just kind of watch. You be in the room; you be a part of the committee, and I'll lead this community meeting of 30 community members to redraw our elementary school attendance zones.” I knew [ ] could do it, and so I gave it to [ ]. We talked about every single meeting ahead of time. Had my playbook from [ ] that I kept, and then implemented that. We made some modifications.

*Building trust.* The participants in the study mentored their protégés by working to develop trust over time and with daily communication. Spending the time to build trust with others served as a mechanism to link the participants ideologically as well as strengthen the operational relationship by fostering the mentor-protégé ties. Lance explained,

So much of what you do is just daily, constant, dialogue and talking and knowing when to read a person if they're struggling, or if you say anything. Said hello to Sally there yesterday. She'd been busy. "Everything going okay." Checking in on her. Or asking Holly, an assistant superintendent for HR. They talk daily. "Sally's new in this role. Is she doing okay? Is she happy here?" Checking on her; making sure it's going well.

During the interview with Vicky, she shared a story about the superintendent spending several valuable hours with her before she was a principal. This experience with Donna was a pivotal moment in the mentor-protégé relationship as well as serving to strengthen the ideological linkage between the two by building trust and understanding the superintendent's vision for the district. Vicky shared,

During my internship to become a principal or an administrator, I asked her if I could interview her for a paper, that kind of thing. It was just a quick ten-minute little survey, and she spent three hours with me after school. I really had an opportunity to sit down with her and really learn about her vision for the district, but then also about her path and her story, just to kind of hear how she developed

along the way and grew in Casterly, as well as in other districts. That helped me become closer to her and build that trust, and that relationship piece, especially since she spent so much time with me after school, and helped me with that. The day she spent that time with me to grow me as a leader and develop me as a leader and want to help me with my internship as well as receive my doctorate.

*Modeling leadership.* It appears from the data that by engaging in specific, observable behaviors that encourage positive actions in others, the superintendent participants can greatly influence others. The positive behaviors of mentors are often emulated by those who deem the leader as influential. The superintendents in this study provided examples of positive leadership which served as prominent influential experiences for their protégés. The following examples were not calculated occurrences on the part of the superintendents, rather they delivered organic experiences of how to provide leadership in moments when it was needed. For instance, Sally recounted a story in which Lance provided such an example. She shared,

We've had a couple of issues and we had a principal leave, just leave. One weekend she just resigned. So he and I went and talked with that faculty and let that faculty know what had happened. And then we met with that faculty again to make the determination, do we post for this position or do we go back to our pool and pick the person who was next on our list. And so I think by his very presence, again being the collaborative leader that he is and involving the campus

to some extent in the decision making or at least gathering enough information to make a decision. I think greatly impacts or influences that campus.

She continued,

He's very humble. You know he'll walk in, never in my career have I had a principal resign one week and just leave the next day. And so he was able to, there were some teachers who started crying. There were some teachers who spoke and said, "Well I knew something was wrong because she was always in her office and she never..." And he took all of those questions and he reframed it as, "You know she probably missed her family; she had grandkids." And when I know he felt like, "How could she do this to us? How could she do this to her staff and the kids?" But he never said anything negative or derogatory about her or the why. It is always with the utmost respect for people when they've made that decision. Even though it's cost him a lot of additional work, and headache, and perception issues.

Regarding Lance's leadership during a sudden campus principal resignation and the comfort it brought to the difficult situation, she added,

As tumultuous and unsteady and horrible as it is to have your principal walk out of the building one Friday and then resign and never come back, "We're gonna get through this because of you guys." His very presence made them feel energized and "I know we can do it." So he brings a level of comfort.

Similarly, Vicky recalled a story in which Donna modeled leadership that left a lasting impression on her. She stated,

Last year, I think it was the beginning of the year, there was a big flood. Some of our students couldn't get home, and so me and a group of principals stayed overnight at the middle school, and she stayed there with us. I get little goose bumps, but she stayed there with us the entire night, and that was a great example.

Although relational linkages were evident connecting most of the participants, one participant indicated that she did not have a mentor relationship with anyone in the district. She stated, "A mentor for me? I'm looking for one, that's what's been hard." She described herself as being very isolated and floating on her own island. When asked what kind of relationship she needed she stated,

Actual mentorship, actual coming to the table with ideas and solutions, and not just sound bites. I've been telling people, I'm looking for this amazing female superintendent because I want to go and learn everything from them. I want this great, or male, I'll even take a male at this point. I want to find someone I'm just like, "You are a people person. You are great at relations. You are intelligent; you have the skill." That's not very common right now.

This participant revealed that she recognized the need for a mentor relationship with someone in the district. She expressed that speaking about it may have a positive impact. She disclosed, "Maybe if I talked about it more, maybe I'd be more okay." This

participant's testimony also revealed that since a weak relational linkage exists between herself and her supervisors, it has led her to seek out a mentor relationship with other principals within the school district.

### **Aligned Relationship: Ideological and Relational Linkages**

According to the data, the aligned relationship revealed the ideological connections that tie the individual participants together regarding their mutual educational belief system. The aligned relationship is nuanced from the advising and teaching role of the supervisor and emerged as a distinct operational relationship which reflects both ideological linkages, such as like-mindedness and having a united vision, as well as relational linkages, for instance trusting one another and having things in common. The aligned operational relationship was exemplified by two general themes: vision unity and philosophical connection.

Vision unity. The data revealed that the participants from both districts were largely united by their superintendent's vision for the district. Lance stated that his vision for Riverrun ISD is to "continue the steady trajectory that we've already been doing for years." The Riverrun participants understood Lance's vision of continual growth and improvement which was reflected in the data. Toni described Lance's vision of continual improvement:

I think that, if I had to put a phrase in place, it would be we have a good school district but how do we turn it into an even better school district? I would say from

good to great. Not being okay with the status quo. Just because you get good scores doesn't mean that there aren't areas to improve. It's about continuous improvement and doing it in a way that's sustainable.

Furthermore, the Riverrun principals both expressed a clear understanding of the superintendent's vision. Beth shared,

I feel like I have a clear mission and expectations. I feel like when I get presented with a dilemma, I feel like I have the tools I need to navigate through it in a way that is in alignment with the vision and the mission that he thoroughly communicates to us.

This ideological alignment was also evident in Casterly ISD. Pam described Donna's vision as "an active academic success beyond just state tests for kids." Vicky echoed this sentiment regarding Donna's vision. She explained,

Our jobs are student success, so a lot of times she'll speak at convocations or principals' meetings, and it's always centered, at the end of the day, we have a million things going on, but at the end of the day, it's getting students to be successful. You know, if I have a pre-K student, let's think about, that kid's going to be graduating, how are we starting from Day 1 all through the pathway of Casterly ISD, to support this student and get him to be educated, well-rounded, and do whatever that student would want, or that kiddo would want to be a great and productive citizen?

The data showed that the superintendents communicate their vision for their districts in a variety of venues enhancing clarity and alignment. Emily stated,

I think since that is our district vision, that's something that you should internalize as a district employee. I think when we do hear her speak at functions, not necessarily principal meetings, but when we hear her speak at banquets or beginning of the year convocations, or end of the year things, that is something that I do believe she has definitely gotten across to us.

*Philosophical connection.* The data also revealed that participants shared a philosophy that brings them together. Such a connection ties components of the belief systems of individuals into one intelligible ideology. Philosophical connection emerged from the data as a dominant ideological linkage of the aligned relationship. This philosophical connection joined the participants in intrinsic ways beyond being unified under a common district vision. Pam described her connection with Donna as follows,

We grew up in the same time period with the same type of parents, that philosophy is you work hard; you give everything that you have, you have a boss, and you answer to that boss. In that age that we grew up, it was different. You hear the same conversations about millennials and trying to understand them, and then the realization, oh my goodness, we're the old ones now. We're the ones that are 49.



She described their philosophical connection as a joining and coming together of their educational beliefs. She further explained,

I think those common things, and the working, you know, coming together around the work, and there being so much of it, and nobody being here in central office just brings people together. The positive, the friendship, the relationship began with work, but then takes on a different meaning. You begin to care about the people that you're working with every single day to try to create opportunities for kids. It kind of glues and it cements our beliefs together.

Lance described the philosophical connection as knowing someone's heart when he shared about his operational relationship with a deputy superintendent. He stated,

I'd worked with [ ] for three years at [ ], so we knew each other well. I knew his heart. Even if there was a mistake made here and there, I know what kind of person he is. Same for me. If I have a screw up, [ ] gives me a break because he knows what my intent is.

Regarding his philosophical connection with the deputy superintendent, he shared,

One of the first people I thought of when I had this vacancy was Sally. That's lucky to already have that kind of connection, if I hired somebody brand new, you take a year or two to get to know each other.

He added,

Well, even brand new, if you didn't really know this person, you have high hopes, but you still got to talk a lot, and what do you want, and they got to learn to dance with each other. Sally and I have had that connection a long time. It's very, very close and easy, and that's helpful.

Vicky described her perception of how the philosophical connection of the leaders within the district may be accomplished. She indicated that it starts first with the superintendent. She advanced,

It starts from the top down, her setting that expectation, believing that all of our students can do it. Then hiring people with a like mindset of anything is possible, we go above and beyond for our kids, and then in turn we communicate that to our staff too. I think in short, that's kind of the way it builds.

She further explained with the following example of the aligned operational relationship with Pam,

She's very action-oriented, which I'm the same way. I'm always very solution-oriented, what do we need to do. She has the same mindset. More than a supervisor, or from an evaluative standpoint, it's more, let's figure this out together. I do feel that partnership with her. If I look at the main components that we all make sure, it's to be firm, to have high expectations, to believe in our kids, to do whatever it takes to go above and beyond. I think we share that

commonality. When you're speaking, based on that foundation, you're speaking the same terms and the same kind of language.

### **Personal Relationship: Relational Linkage**

Another operational relationship that emerged from the data, the personal relationship, suggested that the participants value the personal quality of the association with the other person. The closeness was an object in itself. They spend time with friends and family outside of the work environment because it feels good to be with them. They care about each other, want the best for each other and are there for each other. The personal relationship revealed by the data was a strong relational linkage between two of the participants which goes beyond the work environment. This personal relationship appeared to take several forms such as friendship development and getting to know each other's family. However, the development of a personal relationship was only reported by two participants.

*Friendship development.* The data suggests that in the work environment, relationships may move beyond strictly a relationship between people who only interact because of their work. Over time, individuals may develop closer friendship ties that are unrelated to their working relationship. Pam described her social relationship with Donna as a caring friendship in which they share similar interests, mutual respect, and an attachment to each other. She also mentioned that the two of them spend time together socializing outside of work and often talk about non-work related topics. Pam stated

regarding her friendship with Donna, “I care about her a lot. She's, like I said, we both graduated in 1985. We could have been pals in college and in high school.”

Donna also shared,

I'm very fortunate that Pam and I are very good friends. We have very similar philosophies of education, we have very similar work ethics, we have similar senses of humor, and, let's face it, it's because I hired somebody for that reason.

Getting to know family. It appears from the data that a personal relationship goes beyond the individuals' friendship. It extends to each other's family and it requires compassion and concern for the other person's loved ones. Pam spoke about getting to know Donna's family,

On a personal level I've come to really, really adore her family. She recently lost her father, and I hurt when I go to places that he was at because they were very welcoming. They live in Austin, so I have a friendship with them in Austin. Of course, when you get to know somebody, and you're a friend, and you know their family, you're impacted by not just them, but their family.

Pam described a need for her to develop a stronger personal relationship with other administrators within the district and expressed that there is an opportunity for her to do so by building a stronger friendship or relational connection with the principals. She explained how the principals needed to get to know her as a person. She noted,

“That humanness, I think sometimes they see people like Donna and me and some of the others and they don't see us as people.” She explained further,

For me, the personal relationship with them is an opportunity. I'm talking about a healthy personal relationship, not I'm going to social hour with them every Friday. They need their alone time. Some of that happened this year, what couldn't happen before which was, “Pam, we're all going to be over here if you want to stop by.” I purposely, before I say no, I purposely this year said, “Okay, let me stop by” because they were going through some stuff with some changes, and I think they need to know me as a person. The first time, in my former district when somebody saw me in jeans at a conference, he was like, “Pam, I didn't know you wore jeans.” I'm like, “Come on!”

## Research Question Two

*How are the existing operational relationships built?*

The data revealed that the reported working relationships may be built and sustained by central office administrators and elementary school principals. Several themes emerged that illustrate specific strategies employed that not only built but expanded the operational relationships. These included: being accessible, engaging in meaningful experiences, interacting with others, and valuing people. Although each of the participants expressed the importance of having respectful, professional operational relationships with other administrators within their school districts, some had difficulty articulating how those operational relationships are actually built. Lance explained,

It's hard for me to verbalize it, and I'm struggling with the steps, or the procedures. I'm better at relationships than I am at strategic planning. I have to force myself to think all the time. It's kind of like thinking about bond elections and things, it's more concrete, but vision statements are harder for me than relationship building. I'm just more comfortable with building a relationship with Beth and [ ] and [ ], right now, or Sally, or any of the old booster club principals, because that just comes naturally to me. Just talking and making people feel comfortable. It's hard for me to articulate what I do. I don't know.

## **Being Accessible**

It appears from the data that being accessible means being physically present, or visible, as well as being receptive to conversations with the campus and district leaders and is one way leaders build a working relationship. Thus, according to the participants, being accessible to other leaders is important by being physically present and available and open to dialogue. While some participants struggled to define the practical steps to building successful operational relationships with other leaders within their districts, some clear patterns emerged. For the superintendents, being visible and available was a strong builder of the operational relationships. For the deputy and assistant superintendents, the structural linkage that places them closely with principals as their immediate supervisors, created a role of boundary spanner.

Visibility and availability. The superintendent participants, according to the data, make an intentional effort to be physically present. Such effort constitutes a way to be seen by the other study participants as well as many members of the district and community in which they serve. Not only were they physically present at meetings and district and campus events, but they were also available to speak with other district and campus leaders and listen to feedback. Being accessible prominently involved visibility and availability as a primary way in which the working linkage between the superintendents and their executive leaders and elementary school principals was strengthened. As Donna plainly expressed, “I need to be visible.” Lance communicated

how the Riverrun school board set a visibility expectation for him when he started as the district's superintendent. He stated,

My predecessor, and the Board, was real clear about this, the last couple of years here was just vacant, he was absent, not here at all. Didn't go to principal meetings, wasn't on campus, didn't have an e-mail address. Crazy stuff! One of their big expectations for me was reestablish a relationship with the community, the campuses, and the school leadership. You think that shouldn't be a goal, but it was. Just to be visible, be out there, and reconnect people to the office of the superintendent. I was very visible in buildings and I went to everything. Softball, baseball, car washes, we had our gala Saturday night. You just go to everything. People for that first couple of years were like, "Ah, I can't believe he came to our band banquet. No superintendent's ever come to our band banquet.

Lance's presence at district events as well as availability and a responsive attitude to the employees and community of Riverrun ISD appears to have helped build the operational relationships with members of his leadership team. The deputy superintendent and principal participants within Lance's district conveyed views regarding Lance's presence and accessibility. Sally expressed,

He's always available; he's accessible. His door is always open. If he's not he'll say, "Give me two minutes." It's a very easy exchange. I've never felt rebuffed or like I was bothering him.



Similarly, Beth shared,

He's definitely present. He will come and do, there have been several times where I get a wonderful email from a parent super complimentary about a teacher and I'll send it to him celebrating this teacher. And he will print that email and come to the campus and he and I will go directly to that teacher and he personally thanks that teacher for her hard work and for the feedback from the parent. That's a big deal! And that's not just something that he's done once. I know that if I send off something to celebrate someone he'll come personally to acknowledge that person. With that, he's not micromanaging the things that are happening on this campus. I feel like he sets the tone. He sets the expectations and then he is, I feel like he is available. If there's something that I need to try and troubleshoot, I go to the deputy superintendent. But Lance is very much involved in setting that tone, setting expectations, and then helping to celebrate the great things that are happening.

Beth also expressed how Lance is accessible and readily listens to her ideas. She shared,

I could approach him without question. He receives. What was it the other week? We had this huge two-day conference where every teacher from the entire district, we went to the high school and we did two days of learning. And a lot of people were tweeting. And I said at an ELT meeting, "Did we create a hashtag for people to follow all the tweets of these teachers doing really cool things?" My

question was “are we showing our community all the cool stuff that we did for those two days?” And he said, “What a great idea!” That’s an example of a time that he was very receptive to an idea like that.

*Boundary spanner.* Another element of being accessible and available also emerged from the data and involved the deputy and assistant superintendents. They built the operational relationships with the elementary school principals by acting as liaisons between the principals and other district administrators, thus serving as a boundary spanner. As such, they help bring in new ideas, understandings, and other resources that facilitate the operational relationship. In addition, participants report being able to strengthen the linkages between themselves and the elementary school principals by troubleshooting with them and facilitating communication with other individuals within the district. Sally explained, “When principals have a question about something, whether it’s discipline, student safety, they’ve got parents screaming at them, a lot of times they’ll call me.” Toni also confirmed Sally’s role as a boundary spanner when she stated, “If I have an issue that I need to talk through, I’m going to call the deputy superintendent. Lance is not my go to person, mainly because of the organizational chart. My go to person is Sally.” She added,

If there’s something that I need to try and troubleshoot, I go to the deputy superintendent. It depends on the dilemma that I’m facing. Sometimes it’s just “I’ve got to bounce this idea off of you,” “I’ve got to think this through,” or “does this sound like a good idea or a good plan?” If it’s something that I feel she needs

to know or a matter of information, “Hey, this happened and I need you to know about it.” That’s just me giving her information about something she needs to know. But again, I feel like I can call her at any time. She’s very responsive and very supportive.

Beth also stated regarding Sally as a boundary spanner,

Whenever we have a legal question, we involve Sally. Whenever we have a parent concern, we involve Sally. Whenever there's an emergency to happen on my campus, whether medics are involved or there's a serious injury with a child, we're involving Sally. Sometimes, it's just troubleshooting, “Hey, I've got this difficult situation. I want to get one other administrator's thoughts on something before a decision is made. What are your thoughts on this?”

Data revealed that Pam, the assistant superintendent in Casterly ISD who supervises the principals, also serves as their boundary spanner by being accessible and by acting as a bridge to enhance communication with other district leaders. Pam recognizes her role as the boundary spanner and how it has the potential to build the operational relationships. In this role, she serves as a buffer, or liaison, between the principals and other central office administrators, thus enhancing trust and rapport with the principals. Pam is available to facilitate positive communication. She stated,

I'm probably the go-to person for most of them. If they don't want or feel like they're unsafe to ask something of somebody else, they'll come to me and check it

out and ask me and let me work that with whoever they feel may not see positive intent of what they're asking. They call me when they have issues with others that I don't supervise. They'll call me and say, "Hey, can we have a meeting. This is going to be hard conversation that I need you to give me some feedback about how people are feeling about this individual and the way they lead their department or whatever." They feel safe enough to call me. I think that's a good place to be.

Vicky also explained Pam's role as the boundary spanner who helps bring departments and campuses together and also provides them with whatever assistance they may need. She communicated,

The assistant superintendent kind of puts all the glue together. Whether it be from HR to communications to curriculum, each director has a different message, but at the end it all kind of ties together. She tells me what to do, put a needs assessment in. She does a quick turnaround. Sometimes she even hand carries to the business office or the curriculum and instruction department to get it going for me. I think she's an advocate for our campus. When we have those meetings, it's basically an okay, what do you need kind of thing. For example, there's an update with the campus improvement plan, the CIP. I needed some help, because I know there were some updates. She walked me through everything, and that was very helpful to me. Because I was trying to wrap up the school year, and I really don't know how to do this section of it, and she walked me through it.

## **Engaging in Meaningful Experiences**

Data revealed that in order to build operational relationships, the participants engaged in shared meaningful experiences which involved working closely alongside each other. At times these shared connections involved dealing with the challenges associated with the district's fast growth or working through a sudden crisis. The superintendent participants also acknowledged that hiring their team contributed to building the operational relationship since both the superintendent and the participant who was hired felt positively about the experience.

*Collaborative exchanges.* According to the data, collaborative exchanges involves the participants often work jointly on district issues. For instance, they worked together to make curriculum decisions. They also engaged in collaborative work such as participating in investigations, or campus or district problems together. Pam described how the work itself is engaging in a shared meaningful experience that helps to build the operational relationship. She stated, "I think the work brings you close when you start new together, and you have to strategically select changes or implement changes that the board wants." She described working with principals on curriculum decisions:

It's the work. Like if you don't get the traction. There's not any traction in reading and writing, but somehow we got math, we got science. We're just not getting and having to make decisions about, "Okay, what's missing in this?", and having the tough discussions about the right people versus the right curriculum versus the right programs to augment the curriculum, and then resources.

Regarding the closeness that comes with working with cabinet members and principals on various tasks she also shared,

It's the work and the issues that you have to go through together with cabinet administrators, and do things that have to be investigated, facts that have to be sorted versus fiction, information that has to be presented for serious issues that come up, and with others in HR. I think that, when you do all that type of work, it changes that professional relationship just like when you're working with a campus and strictly with them because they're improvement required because there's a lot more that needs to be done.

According to the data there are times when collaborative work comes naturally and those dealing with critical incidents provides an opportunity to jointly make decisions. These occasions build up the operational relationships between the administrators involved. Lance shared of such an occurrence,

Last Monday morning sometime, a junior committed suicide. Sally and I spent about 9:00 to 12:30 in the afternoon in the principal's office, helping him as he circled up, first, all the student's teachers to tell them first, and to process, and ask them some additional questions, "Did you see anything coming?" Sally and I spent half a day over there and then, on the phone or e-mail, the rest of the day interacting with him and helping him with a Google doc to draft a message to all staff that was going to go out, and we did a timeline too, exactly what time to let this message go. What are you going to ask the staff to do?

Sally shared how Lance's collaborative approach to addressing a crisis of losing a student was part of how things operate at Riverrun ISD. She stated, "I think it's through his actions and his presence and his involvement in what we do. It's how we all came together around that situation that defines his vision and how we do our business."

Hiring own team. Data revealed that hiring the leadership team members becomes a meaningful experience in which the participants experienced together and worked as a catalyst for the superintendents to build the operational relationships with the participants. The hiring of the executive-level leadership position or campus principal was an experience that only the superintendent and person being hired could experience together and appeared to be an event that worked to build the operational relationship. Donna stated, "I was able to hand-pick people that met my qualifications that I consider most important and because of that, we all get along very well." Donna shared regarding hiring Pam, "I have a good working relationship with my curriculum superintendent, I believe because I was able to hire my own team when I became superintendent."

When a superintendent freely chooses a person for a leadership position, the person being hired is linked to the superintendent by the experience itself. For instance, Lance expressed how hiring Beth as a principal was a shared meaningful experience which aided in building the operational relationship. He explained,

To build a relationship with Beth, I listened to what they wanted, I talked to her about it, and I promoted her. Naturally, that builds a relationship with her. She

likes being promoted, and I like promoting her, so that gives you this common experience.

### **Interacting with Others**

According to data, the participants built their operational relationships by interacting with each other in a variety of ways. These included frequent informal interactions which involved unscheduled face-to-face conversations, phone calls, or electronic communication and formal interactions which were scheduled one-on-one meetings or meetings with several district administrators, and spending time together, i.e., chronological time; that is elapsed weeks, months, or years which plays a role in the building of operational relationships.

*Frequent informal interactions.* Each of the participants described small, day-to-day casual communications that build the operational relationships between them. These spontaneous exchanges in the work environment take place in unplanned ways and in multiple settings. These interactions more often occur between the participants with the closest connections according to the organization's structure. The interactions between the superintendent and deputy or assistant superintendent were more frequent and appear to build a stronger operational relationship than the interactions between the superintendent and principals. As one principal participant described, "There's definitely a trend between the positions that people are in and their level of interaction based on their position." Lance elaborated regarding this perspective:



A superintendent-principal relationship is different from superintendent-deputy relationships. It becomes a lot closer because we're side-by-side every day, and we're driving some place and we're gnashing about the attendance on a meeting she's planning. Just like a principal and assistant principal relationship is closer than a principal and superintendent relationship.

He continued,

I went to the funeral of the principal that hired me at my first AP job a week or two ago. I was telling somebody, he's the best boss I ever had. Which sounds funny, because I had some great superintendents, but my interaction with Mr. Stowe every single day as a 26-year-old assistant principal, what he did to shape me was very important to my career. I didn't see my superintendent when I became a principal. I didn't see my superintendent every day, maybe once a month, or a couple of times a month at the most, at meetings.

Lance expounded regarding his frequent informal interactions with Sally and Chris, a former deputy superintendent with whom he previously worked. He shared,

Even though I was really well treated by that person, it was not the same day-to-day relationship. Sally, I saw her on a day-to-day basis for six years at [    ]. I see her daily here. Chris is where I saw some change, because we went from that, I see you periodically at meetings or when I drop by or whatever, to seeing him every single day. We're together all the time. That had a great change, a very

positive change. Sally, she and I slipped back into our old routine, and I wouldn't say that it's changed any.

These frequent informal interactions provide relevant information that builds a healthy operational relationship. These interactions reflect Lance's concern for Sally's welfare in her new role:

So much of what you do is just daily, constant, dialogue and talking and knowing when to read a person if they're struggling, or if you say anything. I said hello to Sally there yesterday. She'd been busy. "Everything going okay?" Checking in on her, or asking Holly, an assistant superintendent for HR. They also talk daily. Sally's new in this role. "Is she doing okay; is she happy here?" Checking on her, making sure it's going well.

The superintendent further shared how the brief daily interactions with his deputy superintendent keeps him abreast of the deputy's work:

We still touch base every day, several times a day. "What are you doing? What is she working on?" She's just giving me an update, "Hey, been working with this parent following up on a grievance." She knows to come in and keep me posted. She knows I trust her to handle it, but she's also just keeping me up to date and is doing a gut check.

Although one of the Casterly principals felt that Donna's interactions were sufficient, the other principal did not feel that the informal interactions with her

superintendent were frequent. She believed this is due to the geographical distance of her campus in comparison to others. She shared,

We're not the furthest campus, but we're probably the second furthest campus from here. No, very seldom does she come to our campus. So the geography inhibits. There's not a lot of interaction there. We get our usual pop-ins like open house, or meet the teacher, but not a lot other than that.

Formal interactions. In addition to the opportunities for informal conversations, the operational relationships are also built by formal, planned interactions and scheduled opportunities. These interactions usually take place during scheduled communication occurrences between leaders within the district which are most often group meetings as well as one-on-one appointments. They also provide clarity to district issues and facilitate district-wide communication. These formal interactions can also provide the superintendent with recurring opportunities to meet face-to-face with principals. Donna stated,

Formally, we have, like I said, our cabinet meeting every Monday. We have formal meetings set up. Every department, every cabinet member oversees a section of our Friday board update, so all of those get submitted to me, and I edit it before it goes out, so that's another formal method where, if I see something, "Ooh, we'd better talk about this before this goes out to the board," or, "I'm not sure about that decision," or, "I think we need more information." Sometimes they'll put something in the Friday board updates that I know that no board

member will have any idea what they're talking about, so I'll bring them back and say, "Let's bring this down to, they don't know the background, they don't know what happened last year," that kind of thing. At the beginning of the week and the end of the week, we always have a formal interaction.

Beth shared a strategy that Lance employs with the Riverrun principals in which all the principals meet only with him immediately following the district-wide leadership meeting. All district-level administrators are dismissed for the superintendent's meeting in which he meets only with the campus principals. This more intimate, recurrent dialogue allows the group of principals to directly communicate with the superintendent. Beth explained,

I feel like we have a very positive organizational relationship in that they organize for us to have educational leadership team meetings periodically and Lance leads those meetings. So they have them at least once a month. And there's usually an agenda that we, there's usually a hot topic that we discuss. And it's not just principals; it's the entire educational leadership team to include everyone in the org chart essentially, down to principals. So we have that meeting. Then as soon as we have the meeting, these larger meetings with everybody on the educational leadership team, Lance excuses everybody else except for principals and we stay and talk about whatever it is we need to talk about. Either things that are happening on our campuses, things that we think need to happen for next year. It's actually a very personal time. There's only 8 or 9 principals and we sit

with Lance and just talk. Once we excuse everyone, it's kind of more of an intimate, you know just us, what's happening for us. And so it's actually a direct line to communicating with the superintendent.

*Spending Time Together.* The interviews revealed that the frequent informal interactions and the structured formal interactions both further strengthen the operational relationships by spending time together with colleagues. These ongoing interactions through months and years makes a significant contribution in shaping operational relationships by providing time to learn about the person's motivations and beliefs and makes working together easier. Donna shared how many of the elementary school principals have grown to trust her over time:

At first there was a great deal of apprehension. I think over time they've seen that I have no political agenda. I'm not out to make anyone look bad or get anything for myself. I think they've seen over time that all I'm interested in doing is whatever we need to do to move our kids forward. That's really it. I don't have anything else hidden on my plate.

Lance described how his operational relationship with Sally has been enhanced naturally over many years of working together:

We worked six years together at [ ] ISD. She was an elementary principal and I hired her as my Coordinator of Language Arts and Social Studies. Later, I was there six years; I promoted her to Director of Curriculum, my right-hand person.

Then when I left to go to [ ], she got my job. We worked side-by-side every day, so I know her very well. I was her supervisor, and close colleagues at [ ], doing curriculum work, and we spent a lot time, daily conversations, which is nice, but when I hired Chris here, the same kind of thing. Well, even brand new, if you didn't know this person, you have high hopes, but you still got to talk a lot, and what do you want, and they got to learn to dance with each other. Sally and I have had that a long time. It's very, very close and easy, and that's helpful. Sally and I have that same kind of relationship. We know each other well.

### **Valuing People**

The data also revealed that the superintendent participants helped to build the operational relationships with the other participants by highly regarding people. This manifested itself in various ways including making people feel loved, comfortable, appreciated, supported and by developing reciprocal trust. The superintendents at times employed behaviors that make people feel appreciated outside of strictly work-related situations. Although the superintendent was encouraging her professional development in the following example from the data, from Vicky's perception Donna made her feel supported and highly considered. She shared,

So, I want to apply to this leadership program, in Austin. It's like six leadership courses, and it's something very important to me, as a young leader and as a person that is very involved with the community. Working with the community is my passion, that's what my thesis is on. I talked to her about it last week; I sent

her an email, and then I also talked to her about it in person. I said, “Not many people get in; it's very competitive.” I asked her for a letter, and she said, “Absolutely!” She goes, “When I'm done with the letter, we're going to make sure that they really know who you are!” I was supposed to pick one person that knows me and my character and can testify to all the great things I've done in my career and for the community. She reassured me that she was going to do whatever it takes to write me an outstanding letter. And that's just one example. I know she's so busy with everything else. You know how it is with letters and things like that. But after she spoke to me and let me know she was going to do whatever it took to write the best letter possible for me to get in, that made me feel very reassured that I felt so supported.

Beth shared a story in which Lance made her feel valued during one of the district's leadership team meetings by showing confidence in her decision making and judgement. She expressed,

The other day we had an ELT meeting. It was right after open carry. The principals had this long conversation about open carry and its influence on our schools. And you know each school is different and has a different history and I shared that I have a community here that will be super sensitive to someone being seen with a gun in our parking lot. I would be calling a lock-down if I felt like I needed to. And I hope I don't have a zillion lock-downs because it's kind of a scary deal. And afterwards I went up to Dr. L and said “I want you to know I'm

not planning to call a lock-down every day.” And he looked at me and he said, “Do you think for one second that I’m worried about that?” I mean it was very kind. He basically gave me feedback right there in that moment that said “I trust your decision making, don’t worry.”

Vicky shared another example in which Donna made her feel valued. During the interview Vicky became noticeably emotional while speaking about Donna. She recalled the time when students were stranded on the campus during violent weather. The superintendent spent the entire night with Vicky and her leadership staff to help comfort the students. She recounted,

I brought food in, because there's nothing out here, food-wise. She just said, “Of course you would bring food, Vicky. Like you're one person we can count on.” Just little things like that tell me how she feels about me, and I felt very honored, because I know she had so many things going on and so many different things. Just taking five seconds to say that, like of course it would be you that would help us with something. That was just very nice of her, and then just to see her staying with us overnight in the cot, with everybody else, and being there for our kids. Modeling that leadership was very powerful for me. I get goose bumps remembering.

These examples reveal that the superintendents might not always be aware of the impact of their words of encouragement to those with whom they are building a positive



operational relationship. During the interviews, both superintendents struggled to articulate how they practically build positive operational relationships. Lance noted,

It's hard for me to verbalize it here, and I'm struggling with the steps, or the procedures. I'm better at relationships than I am at strategic planning. Just talking and making people feel comfortable. It's hard for me to articulate what I do. I don't know.

Another participant revealed how building relationships was an important aspect of each of the high level leadership positions he has held in multiple districts. By showing people in small ways such as visiting classrooms and sending out personalized birthday cards that they are valued, the relationships were strengthened which are then able to endure more challenging situations, for instance budget reductions. He shared:

I don't mean to say that there's not important work to be done, but what they needed here, especially in [ ] ISD, and here, and in [ ] ISD, was I was somebody who knew how to build relationships. They needed a human touch, and luckily that's what I'm better at than I am at reducing a budget deficit. We've done that, and I can get that going, and we did a budget reduction in [ ], a budget reduction here. I don't like it, but it still comes down to relationships, and teachers trust you that the things you're cutting, while they're hard, they trust that you're doing the right thing. That comes from being visible and sending them birthday cards, walking into their classrooms, and talking to them, letting them see they can trust you. They don't like that you've taken the extra second

conference away, but they understand that you've also cut two assistant superintendent titles from the org chart, and that you're starting there. You know what I mean? Even that kind of stuff is still relationship-based.

A participant shared about a conversation he had with his son during his departure from a previous district that illustrates his belief in the significant role valuing others plays in building operational relationships:

They liked me there because I sent them birthday cards, and I was more than likely in their classroom, or involved them in a discussion when we were searching for a principal. I said, “Man, you got to know, it's not about what you know, it's about how you treat people.” Everything in life is about a relationship. If you do it right, you're going to have a hard conversation with somebody along the way, but if you've built up this bank account of goodwill, you can draw down on that periodically.

He continued, “What holds true, I think like for my son Will, if you're nice to people, genuinely nice, then you involve people in the process and you tell them what you know when you can, at the end of the day they're going to appreciate you.”

### **Research Question Three**

*To what extent do the existing relationships reflect the attributes of organizational learning?*

Findings for this study's third research question are presented according to three features of organizational learning: systems thinking, distributive leadership, and continual capacity development, which were illustrated by the data. Evidence for each of the principles of organizational learning was present in the data only to some extent.

#### **Systems Thinking**

Systems thinking focuses on the way that an organization's distinct systems, or departments, interrelate and how the different parts mutually interact to benefit the entire institution. It emphasizes developing innovative solutions to complex situations, sharing ideas, and encourages collaboration among the different people within the system regardless of rank or position. Systems thinking is in direct contrast to the bureaucratic notion of strict separation of specialties. In a learning organization, systems thinking allows for the individuals in different positions across the district to work as one cohesive team and provides the perspective that each person within the organization can impact the entire system (Fullan, 2006).

According to the data, the existing working relationships, the focus of this study, reflect that the interactions take place with a focus on the entire school district and that all members of the organization intentionally address the school district needs and vision

with a holistic approach. As one participant illustrated how her superintendent influences this organizational learning principle by emphasizing working together and is evident to some extent within the aligned relationship. Elements of a systems thinking mindset are evident in the data from the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and elementary school principals. Vicky shared:

I think one of her messages would be to think big picture, especially for principals, because we get so stuck in the mindset of individual classrooms or our campus, but really, we're all a team. We really do work together as a team. There's groups of principals that work together and facilitate and share ideas, and I think she helps foster those things. We have leadership summits, and we'll have an opportunity to collaborate and work together. She promotes that. She doesn't promote, in my opinion, individualized, you know, this campus is going to do this, this campus is going to do this. Her message is, we're a team, let's do this together kind of thing.

Another participant also shared how each person within the district can influence the entire district irrespective of their official position,

Your influence on the people around you every single day is far more powerful than what you think it is. And that means that every interaction you have with someone is meaningful. That boils down to customer service. It boils down to making the right decision for each individual child. And an emphasis that no matter where you are in the organization, whether you're a principal, a teacher, it

doesn't matter, all of us have great power to influence the health of the organization. I think that's the main message.

Similarly, Pam revealed a systems thinking perspective when she shared how different leaders in various positions have an opportunity to impact the overall vision of the district when she stated, "No matter what position you play, you have that unifying and compelling vision of what that is and commitment to making it happen."

### **Distributive Leadership**

Distributive leadership can be defined as practices which "rely on multiple sources of leadership across the organization to guide and complete numerous tasks that vary in size, complexity, and scope" (Hoy & Miskel, 2008, p. 439). The data revealed that such leadership is enacted by multiple individuals regardless of their positions. In other words, all members of leadership at both campus and district levels have an opportunity to exercise leadership. As a result, distributed leadership is focused on improving the dispersal of leadership in order to improve the organization, i.e. continual capacity building of its members, which promotes risk taking and decision making freedom. In addition, distributive leadership appears to encourages leadership empowerment and autonomy throughout the organization. This organizational learning principle was evident in the mentor-protégé relationship to some extent as a way of promoting others' professional growth and building trust. As Donna asserted regarding the improvement of leaders within her district, "My overall desire is the success of our

children. I believe the way that we get there is that all of us empower ourselves with the leadership that we need in every area.”

The data revealed that the superintendents trust the elementary school principals to make decisions for their campuses. The principals each agreed that they are given a sufficient amount of autonomy to conduct their leadership responsibilities and to take risks. Toni shared, “Being a risk taker is one of my strengths and I feel like I've been allowed to take risks and especially by Sally, I've been encouraged too.” Vicky also described how her autonomy gives her the opportunity to imagine and execute new ideas:

I do feel like, because I'm given the autonomy to really think of anything that I can imagine, execute it. She allows me that freedom, with all the principals. I feel like that's very important to me, that I have the ability to execute some of my ideas, and somebody's willing to listen to them. I've already suggested about ten different ideas today, and someone has heard all of them.

The elementary school principals described ways in which they influence decision outcomes which is another manifestation of distributive leadership within the school districts studied. The principals were able to provide input regarding district-wide curricular decisions as well as campus specific decisions that required central office approval. This influence, however, appeared limited and somewhat constrained by the hierarchical arrangements that give departments power to approve or deny principal decisions. Pam elaborated regarding principal decision making power:

They don't have complete autonomy. They have curriculum instruction working with them. They have the coordinators and directors. They have the business office. "You can't submit that, or this is the way you need to do it. You can't buy that; it's not allowed from that vendor." Or you have me in my department saying, "Nope, you don't have a Title 1 funds, you didn't address that as a need. None of it's mentioned in your CIP. So no, you can't spend the money that way." Then you have HR saying, "You can't hire that person, we've looked into the background, and it's nope," or "No, you're not going to hire your own person, we're going to have a screening committee to make sure that you get the best candidate, and you don't spend your time screening people."

### **Continual Capacity Development**

On-going capacity development focuses on increasing in knowledge and skills as well as the expansion of collaborative information sharing and processing between different units within a school district. Districts that operate as learning organizations will have a high degree of focus on continually building both individual leadership capacity as well as the collective capacity of teams of leaders within the school district by creating a continual loop of leadership development. Organizational learning systems will also require leaders with the ability to connect to other parts of the system and who can in turn develop that same skill in other leaders (Fullan, 2006; Johnson, P., & Chrispeels, J., 2010).

As illustrated by the participants, continual capacity building of the leader participants is evident to some extent within the mentor-protégé relationship. The superintendents both share a desire for professional growth of the leaders within their districts. Modeling leadership is also a way in which the superintendents help build the leadership skills of their protégés.

Beth shared how Lance desires not only her professional growth but also the improvement of others. She shared, “We know that it’s important to him that we continue to work to grow as professionals and to not only hone our skills but to gain new skills to be able to meet the needs of students.” Donna articulated that desire by sharing of when she first became superintendent of Casterly ISD and the importance of having leaders who continually grow in knowledge and skill when she said, “I think what’s most important to me, in my role, is developing the autonomy and leadership capacity of my team.” She explained further,

When I took over as superintendent, there was a massive shakeup on the board, and a massive shakeup in administration. It stopped our district from running, essentially. It called my attention to the fact that if you rest too much of the decision-making, the authority into one person and one position, then the district suffers when those people leave. I constantly talk to my staff about this, everything needs to be able to run if I’m not here. “If I get hit by a bus tomorrow, you shouldn’t notice. You would notice at graduation. You would notice that someone else will have to be the public face, but it shouldn’t affect our curriculum



program, our hiring, our budget. All of you should be autonomous in how you run things.”

She went on to share how leadership capacity should filter to the campus level leadership in order for the success of the district to not rest solely on one individual: the superintendent. Donna explained,

It's very important to me that each of my assistant superintendents, and especially curriculum, realize that it's much more important that they project that autonomy down to our campuses, as well. In other words, good leaders are critical; that you cannot rest the future of a building, of a district, into one person. It's got to be someone that you have succession plans in place. It's got to be something where, if you have a great principal at an elementary campus, and you open a new one, or you have one struggling and you want to move that person, that that campus doesn't then fall apart.

According to the data, the superintendents put specific programs in place to ensure continual capacity development is taking place within the districts. As Emily stated,

I do feel like she wants us to achieve our personal best, whatever that is, meaning we want to build capacity within our district. One of the things the district has done really well under her too, is to develop the leadership, the Educational Administration Program through Texas State, that's all been her. Growing Your Own, and making sure we facilitate and foster that program. That's one of the things that I feel like she does definitely want us to grow more as professionals.

Pam also shared how she felt that one of the superintendent's primary focuses was the district's attentiveness to continual capacity development of its leaders and staff members. She stated,

I think it's the whole continuous improvement and development to become better and better every single year, every single day with what you do. Also, to empower staff and develop staff, and giving that, that's always the first thing that I think she desires us to do.

In summary, the above illustrations of the organizational learning principles are organized in a table reflecting the specific attributes found in this study to some extent. Since the word "extent" denotes a degree or amount to which something is or is believed to be the case, an effort was made to clearly show the emerging attributes of organizational learning. The coded transcripts were reviewed and recoded using a set of organizational learning codes. The instances were classified according to three organizational learning principles: systems thinking, distributed leadership, and continual capacity development. Table 5 shows the instances in which the attributes appeared in the data and are indicated by a checkmark in columns three and four.

Table 5: Organizational Learning Table

Tenets	Attributes	Casterly	Riverrun
		ISD	ISD
Systems Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of Interconnection</li> </ul>	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovative Solutions to Complex Situations</li> </ul>	-	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing ideas/Collaboration</li> </ul>	✓	✓
Distributive Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dispersal of Leadership</li> </ul>	✓	-
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy/Risk-taking</li> </ul>	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creativity/Discovery-making Freedom</li> </ul>	✓	✓
Continual Capacity Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing Improvement Efforts</li> </ul>	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing Knowledge and Skills</li> </ul>	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership Duplication</li> </ul>	✓	-

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Finally, through semi-structured interviews of eight administrators of two mid-sized, suburban public school districts in Texas, participants' perceptions were gathered to illustrate their thoughts related to their operational relationships with each other. A coding scheme was used to uncover themes regarding the types of operational relationships that occur among the participants, how they are built, and the extent to which they reveal the attributes of organizational learning. A description of the school districts and each participant was also included at the beginning of the chapter.

Participants included eight experienced administrators including two superintendents, a deputy superintendent, an assistant superintendent, and four elementary school principals from two districts. Findings gained from their interviews indicated that participants appear to have various forms of operational relationships that can be described as system linkages connecting individuals to each other from different levels of administrative positions. These included the hierarchical relationship, mentor relationship, aligned relationship, and social relationship. Also derived from the data were the ways in which the participants appear to build the operational relationships. The themes revealed were being accessible, engaging in meaningful experiences, interacting, and valuing people. The chapter also included findings regarding to what extent the participants' operational relationships reflect systems thinking, distributed leadership, and continual capacity development, three critical components of organizational learning.

Upon further inspection of the findings, a visual emerges suggesting a progressive movement towards organizational learning. As figure 1 illustrates, while two of the operational relationships, the mentor-protégé relationship and the aligned relationship, appear to exhibit organizational learning principles to some extent, the hierarchical relationship seems to counteract progression towards organizational learning. The next chapter will include a discussion derived from the findings and recommendations for practitioners and future research.

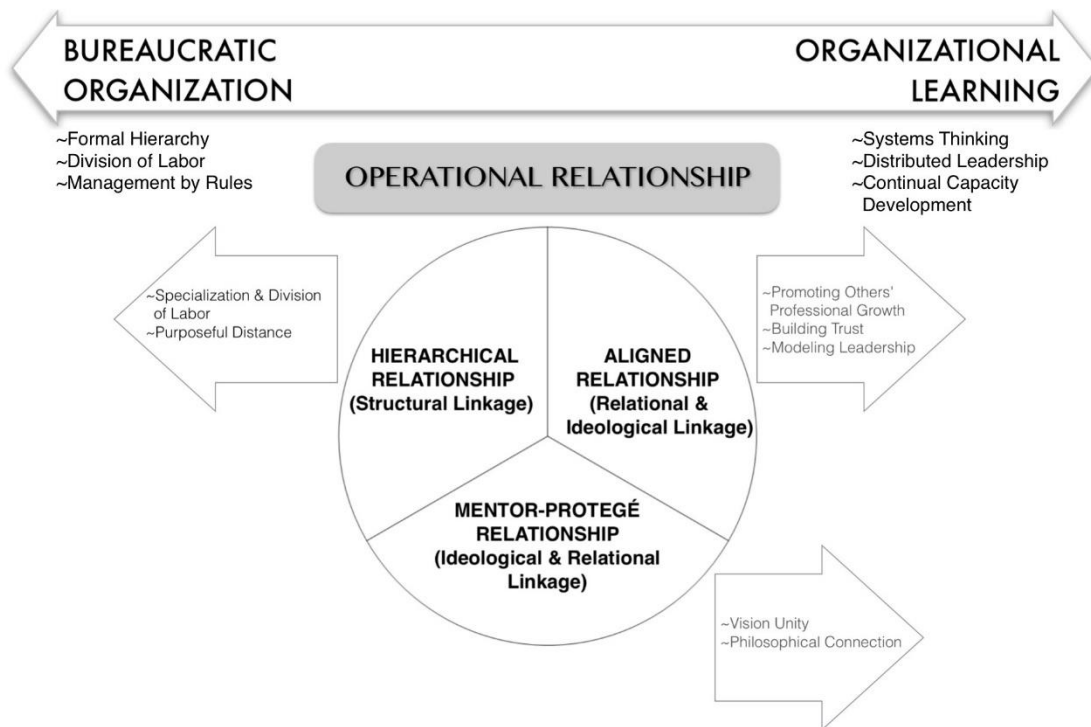


Figure 1: Progression towards Organizational Learning

## **Chapter Five: Summary of Findings**

Campus principals have the responsibility and expectation of ensuring constant teacher improvement and student success. They operate within multifaceted systems and must continually build their leadership capacity in order to reach accountability measures set by federal, state, and local policy. A review of research suggests that they need assistance in meeting these demands.

Previous research suggests that district leaders, such as the superintendent and other high level central office administrators, can support campus principals in their leadership responsibilities by building operational relationships that promote trust, vision alignment, and professional growth (DuFour, R., & Marzano, R., 2011; Marzano, R., & Waters, T., 2009). Conversely, district leaders can serve as controlling agents focused on uniformity, coherence, and standardization (Adler, P., & Borys, B., 1996). Therefore, this study aimed to determine what operational relationships exist within school districts, how the relationships are built, and thus foster the district's progression towards organizational learning.

The research questions that guided this study focused on the organizational linkages between central office administrators including the superintendent, an executive-level district administrator, and elementary school principals and what linkages are used to support transformation from a bureaucratic control-oriented organization to one exhibiting organizational learning characteristics:

- 1) What operational relationships exist between central office administrators and elementary school principals?
- 2) How are the existing operational relationships built?
- 3) To what extent do the relationships reflect the attributes of organizational learning?

The literature suggests that limited investigations focus on operational relationships between the superintendent, executive level district leaders, and elementary school principals (Copland, M., 2003; Honig, M., 2009; Honig, M. 2012). Thus, there was a need to explore how central office leadership may influence the operational relationships that connect multiple leaders throughout the district. Therefore, this study attempted to generate additional knowledge that could provide practicing superintendents with valuable information regarding building a professional relationship with their assistant superintendents and campus principals while providing guidance in the areas of vision coherence and ideological alignment. Finally, this study adds to existing literature and highlights new paths of investigation for future researchers.

### **Summary of Methods**

For this study on central office and campus leadership relationships, an interpretivist phenomenological theoretical paradigm was used since the study's goal was to determine central office and campus leadership linking actions from the perspective of the campus and central office leaders themselves (Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y., 1994). A qualitative approach was necessary for this study as qualitative data, as Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña pointed out, "are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and

explanations of human process” and also give the researcher a means to lead to “serendipitous findings and to new integrations” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 4). Since investigating the operational relationships between central office and campus leaders is inherently an exploration of complex human behavior within dynamic contexts, qualitative research methods provided a way to analyze behavior that helps to build the positive operational relationships. This study attempted to tell the story of central office administrators’ and elementary school principals’ perceptions of their relationships and how these relationships encompass the attributes of organizational learning as perceived by the participants.

A total of eight participants were included in this study. All participants were educational administrators working in two mid-sized, suburban, public school districts in Texas. The study sample included two central office superintendents, a deputy and assistant superintendent, and four campus level elementary school principals. The qualitative data collection methods used included personal, semi-structured interviews and a review of publicly available documents. Additionally, the semi-structured interview process allowed for a dynamic tailored approach, used to identify the perceptions and lived experiences of each participant. The interviewer provided thick depictions of the insights of participants while a review of documents from district websites helped validate data and provided contextual information.

### **Major Findings**

The study findings were fully described in chapter four and were organized in relation to the three research questions. The following is a summary account of the



findings with connections to the extant literature. These are inclusive of operational relationships, strategies to build the operational relationships, and how the operational relationships reflect organizational learning. Findings are synthesized as follows:

**Operational relationships (linkages).** A total of four types of working relationship emerged from the data. These included the hierarchical relationship, mentor-protégé relationship, aligned relationship, and personal relationship. The theory of system linkages was applied to further analyze each of the operational relationships and helped to depict how the different levels of leadership within the school districts interrelate.

*Hierarchical relationship.* Findings suggest that the hierarchical relationship is based intentionally based on specialization and division of labor as well as maintaining a purposeful distance from lower-level administrators such as principals. District job roles and tasks are based on levels of subordination and rank according to the formal structure within the school district. The roles are regulated by a separation and division of labor assigned to an individual based on their particular position within the district's organizational structure. A purposeful distance from the principals was maintained by two participants in order to avoid the appearance of favoritism and to allow principals to develop strong operational relationships with other central office administrators. A hierarchical relationship requires an understanding of the districts' formal chain of command and the roles and responsibilities assigned to each level and position. This finding is consistent with Jorgensen's (2011) assertion that organizational hierarchies

encompass different levels of power with well-defined chains of command. Each administrative layer has specific responsibilities and a line of authority and subordination.

*Mentor-protégé relationship.* The mentor-protégé relationship includes promoting others' professional growth, building trust, and modeling leadership. In this relationship, the superintendents served as mentors for the other participants in the study, and the deputy and assistant superintendent served as mentors for the principals they supervise. The mentor-protégé relationship highly promotes the professional growth of the protégé, by providing leadership training or assisting the protégé in the acquisition of out-of-district training opportunities based on a selection process. Mentoring also requires communicating with protégés on a regularly and by building trust over time. Moreover, mentors are in a position to model leadership for their protégés which is consistent with Senge's (1990) research regarding leadership duplication, or continual leadership cycle in which one leaders duplicates him or herself by raising up a new leader within the district. Further, the mentor-protégé research also suggests that mentoring is associated with a wide range of favorable behavioral, relational, attitudinal, health-related, motivational, and career outcomes and can help promote the kind of leadership building that is evident in learning organizations (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBoise, 2008; Marzano, R., Waters, T., & McNulty, B., 2005; Senge, 1990).

*Aligned relationship.* The aligned relationship relates to the ideological coherence that exists between the participants regardless of their different positions. In addition, it

requires a connection with and understanding of the superintendent's vision within the districts. This finding is in agreement with the literature since vision itself can be a unifying element by providing guidance to an organization by articulating what it wishes to attain (Nanus, 1992). There also appears to exist a philosophical connection joining together individuals according to their educational belief systems. The shared philosophical connection may include similar views regarding hard work, the importance of education, and putting the needs of students first. This finding is in agreement with current research regarding organizational vision and values that suggests that "purpose and core values increase the organizational commitment by engaging, aligning and creating common and shared workplace culture" and therefore improve the overall efficiency and performance of an organization (Anwar, 2013, p. 176).

*Personal relationship.* Additionally, this study found that operational relationships may expand to a personal level going beyond the work environment. For instance, it was found that in some cases the operational relationship turns into a friendship that is inclusive of personal sharing and consideration of family situations. This finding complements emerging research that found that the quality of one's best friendship in the workplace is predictive of job satisfaction (Winstead, B., Derlega, M., Montgomery, M., & Pilkington, C., 2016).

**Strategies to build operational relationships.** Findings indicate operational relationships may be built or strengthened through the following strategies: being

accessible, engaging in shared meaningful experiences, interacting with others, and valuing people.

*Being accessible.* Accessibility appears to be essential to build operational relationships, however, different people approach it from a different perspective. For the superintendents, being accessible means they are often physically present and visible at meetings and various district functions. Visiting school campuses and walking into teachers' classrooms are examples of being accessible. Frequently answering questions, offering feedback, and giving advice to district and campus administrators are promising strategies. These findings are in concert with those of researchers such as Enz and Grover (1992), who found that top leadership visibility plays a vital role in building effective operational relationships. They stated,

Top management visibility is important because it serves a symbolic function, signaling that someone is actively in command of the organization. By being visible in the workplace, top managers can build effective working relationships with subordinates, assess subordinate capabilities, establish expectations for how the firm should be run, and guide aspiring top managers (p. 1).

Being accessible in some cases means taking on the role of boundary spanner. As such, central office leaders tend to link to the elementary school principals to other administrators and departments within the school district. As boundary spanners, central office leaders work as liaisons to troubleshoot with the elementary school principals and facilitate intra-district communication. This finding echoes Honig's (2012) research in that these individuals help bring in new ideas, understandings, and resources that may

increase the learning in the operational relationships. Boundary spanners also safeguard those relationships from outside interference that can potentially lead to unproductivity.

*Engaging in meaningful experiences.* Findings also advance the notion that operational relationships may also be built by engaging in shared meaningful experiences which could include collaborative exchanges and hiring team leaders. The collaborative exchanges involved mutual experiences such as working closely together on important curricular issues, dealing with a campus crisis, and handling challenges associated a district's fast growth. Further, sharing the meaningful experience of being hired or promoted by the individual's own superintendent appears to contribute to the building of the operational relationship.

*Interacting with others.* Building operational relationships can be accomplished by interacting with others. Interactions may take several forms including frequent informal conversations, formal interactions, and spending time together on an ongoing basis. Frequent informal interactions referred to regular, unplanned connections between participants that often occurred on or nearly on a day-to-day basis. Administrators with the closest operational relationships according to the hierarchical structure of the district often speak to one another multiple times per day. The interactions tend to be unannounced office visits or stopping by the elementary school campuses for a brief visit. Frequent informal interactions also tend to include phone calls and text messages. This finding is in agreement with previous research that suggests that the informal methods of communicating are not a cost item for an organization such as a school district, but an investment. According to Ergen (2010), since the communication between leaders within

an organization is not optional, the use of informal communication channels in order for “the information to flow in the right directions is critical for the organization’s performance as well as the morale of employees” (p. 4.).

Findings suggest that regular scheduled meetings, such as weekly cabinet meetings including all district level leaders, and monthly meetings that include district and campus leaders, may serve as a tool to build operational relationships. Formal interactions provide the opportunity to discuss important work-related issues as well as to stay abreast of the same district-wide communication. Planned meetings provide the superintendent the opportunity to regularly speak with and communicate his or her vision to the other participants. This finding concurs with the research regarding the benefits of regular formal interactions in the form of meetings since school districts have a “multitude of aims and purposes, and the meeting provides a location to actualize them” (Allen, Beck, Scott, & Rogelberg, 2014). Moreover, Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2012) found evidence for a connection between meeting interactions processes and success of leadership teams. The results of their study suggested that interactions between people during meetings shape organizational outcomes.

Spending time together whether by weeks, months, or years together serves as a builder of the operational relationships. Administrators who know each other for many years may develop trust and confidence in each other in their leadership roles. In other words, spending time together on an ongoing basis may facilitate getting to know other administrators better. As Guldner & Swensen (2016) report, spending time together has

the potential to strengthen a relationship which in turn causes the individuals to spend more time together, thus creating a reciprocal strengthening effect on relationships.

Valuing people. The study also found that another important aspect of building operational relationships was the leadership quality of valuing people. This approach was not limited to district and campus leaders, but also to other people within the district such as receptionists, custodians, or teachers. The fact that the superintendents regularly displayed the practice of valuing people could suggest that this quality was not only a technique but rather an enduring feature of the superintendents' leadership styles. It appears that superintendents may display acts of kindness and care as well as showing support to others as a natural part of what they do.

Valuing people has the potential to help school districts' progression towards organizational learning since kind leaders tend to draw other leaders into the organization who possess many of similar traits and qualities. This finding is consistent with previous research such as Krakovsky (2013), who found regarding organizational leadership that "there's a tendency toward attraction, selection, and attrition: People who are kind, generous, and compassionate tend to be attracted to and be selected by organizations that match those qualities" (p. 3.)

**Progression towards organizational learning.** Findings suggest that operational relationships may have the potential to aid a districts' progression toward organizational learning by encouraging systems thinking, distributed leadership, and continual capacity development.

Systems thinking. Findings suggest a systems pattern of thinking exists to some extent, revealing that working together as a team to share ideas and solve problems regardless of a person's official position is regarded as important to address the entire school district vision and goals. The notion that one person can influence the entire system reflects the organizational learning principle of systems thinking since "a systemic view of personal power entails empowering the individual to manifest his or her own personal power simultaneously with empowering the organization to manifest its purpose" (Senge, 2011).

Senge's (1990) research also suggests that systems thinking offers just the type of discipline and toolset necessary to foster the seeing of interrelationships rather than strict compartmentalization and for seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots. Systems thinkers retain focus on the system as a whole. Senge argues that this shift of mind is necessary to deal with the complexities of dynamic social systems.

Distributed leadership. The study suggests that district and campus leaders see themselves as playing a vital role in achieving success for the districts' students. However, the leadership of the districts does not appear to lie only with one leader, but rather distributed throughout the district across multiple levels of administrators. This finding is consistent with the literature since research on the topic of distributed leadership has defined leadership as "a group activity that works through and within relationships, rather than individual action," distributed leadership can be thought of as a phenomenon inherently rooted in the operational relationships within an organization (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003, p. 3).



Continual capacity development. As another principle of organizational learning, ongoing capacity development and improvement appears to be critical. Through the promotion of others' professional growth, improvement and development of the leaders within the districts is possible. Further, expectations of ongoing professional improvement tends to influence the culture of the entire district.

At the heart of organizational learning lies a desire to consistently improve, which brings together a set of fundamental practices that are nurtured through learning and adjusting. One of the most prominent practices cited in the literature regarding organizational learning is continuous improvement of individuals and teams within an organization. Organizational learning requires the careful cultivation of human resources with a focus on ideological commitment, empowerment, teamwork, and trust in order for the people within the organization to continually build their capacity to positively impact the organization (Jamali et al., 2006; Senge, 1990) through cooperation and teamwork (Senge, Lichtenstein, Kaeufer, Bradbury, & Carroll, 2007, p. 47).

### **Implications**

The findings of this study suggest that certain operational relationships within a school district may contribute to address the attributes of organizational learning to some extent. Therefore, this study has some implications for practice as well as further research. Given the nature of this study, wide generalizations are not warranted. Further, this study focused only on a small sample size of the research base. The participants were purposefully selected because they work in districts with populations between 8,000

and 15,000 students. Due to the relatively small number of schools in the two districts chosen, the study only addressed the relationships between the superintendents, a deputy and an assistant superintendent, and elementary school principals. Therefore, recommendations for practice and further research as offered as follows.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Superintendents responsible for prioritizing central office administrators' objectives and responsibilities may define the expectation for central office administrators to establish operational relationships with elementary school leaders. Superintendents may also purposefully allot time to visit elementary campuses and engage in mentoring practices in order to promote elementary school principals' professional growth.

Superintendents who wish to move a district from a strict bureaucratic organization towards ongoing organizational learning may need to consider employing actions that make them accessible to and engage in meaningful experiences with district leaders and elementary school principals. These actions may result in the building of productive operational relationships.

Superintendents may promote the organizational learning principles of systems thinking, distributive leadership, and continual capacity development in their districts by assigning to their assistant superintendents the role of boundary spanner. The actions taken by the boundary spanners may serve to bring in new ideas, understandings and other resources that may facilitate the operational relationships with elementary school

principals. Boundary spanners may facilitate the communication between elementary school principals and other district administrators.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Since this study only focused on elementary school principals from mid-sized school districts, future inquiry might replicate this study with elementary school principals who work in large urban school districts. Research should also consider the effect of other variables on operational relationships not considered in this study such as gender, age, or personality traits of participants.

Researchers may also wish to replicate this study in a large urban Texas school district to investigate what operational relationships exist between the superintendent and his or her cabinet level leadership as well as with secondary-level campus principals. A large urban district with multiple layers of bureaucracy between the superintendent and campus leadership may offer different vantage points regarding the topic.

An investigation may be conducted to focus on the superintendents' personality types and compare how the different operational relationships the different superintendents maintain with the leadership within the district and how those operational relationships are built. Others can also investigate whether or not gender plays a role in the operational relationships that are built by superintendents with their district and campus leaders.

Since this study aimed to research the operational relationships between superintendents, assistant superintendents, and elementary school principals. Additionally, research may include other school levels such as middle schools and high

schools, and teachers, to explore the operational relationships that exist between the different levels of district and campus administrative leaders and classroom teachers.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This study was conducted to identify the types of operational relationships that exist between superintendents, deputy or assistant superintendents, and elementary school principals. The study also aimed to determine how the operational relationships are built as well as the extent to which the operational relationships reflect the attributes of organizational learning. There were four operational relationships found which included the hierarchical relationship, the mentor-protégé relationship, the aligned relationship, and the social relationship. The four overall practices that were employed by the study's participants and found to build the operational relationships were being accessible, engaging in meaningful experiences, interacting, and valuing people. The operational relationships found in this study appeared to reflect the attributes of organizational learning to a moderate extent.

This study found that operational relationships are not one-dimensional, or having a single manifestation, but are instead multifaceted. While the participants represented different levels of leadership within the districts' hierarchy, the relationships also reflected other dimensions. For example, while the hierarchical relationship may preserve order and efficiency by maintaining a strict separation of responsibility and a downward flow of power, it can also limit creativity and leadership autonomy. However, its weaknesses can be diminished through the strengthening and building of the other

operational relationships such as the mentor-protégé and aligned relationships. The mentor-protégé relationship provides superintendents the opportunity to teach, mold, and inspire other leaders within their districts while simultaneously serving as a vehicle for ideological coherence to occur, thus building the aligned relationship. Superintendents who desire to build or strengthen their operational relationships with other leaders within their districts may benefit from the findings of this study. District leaders can follow the findings for the study's second research question as prescriptions in order to place emphasis on areas that are in need of improvement.

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